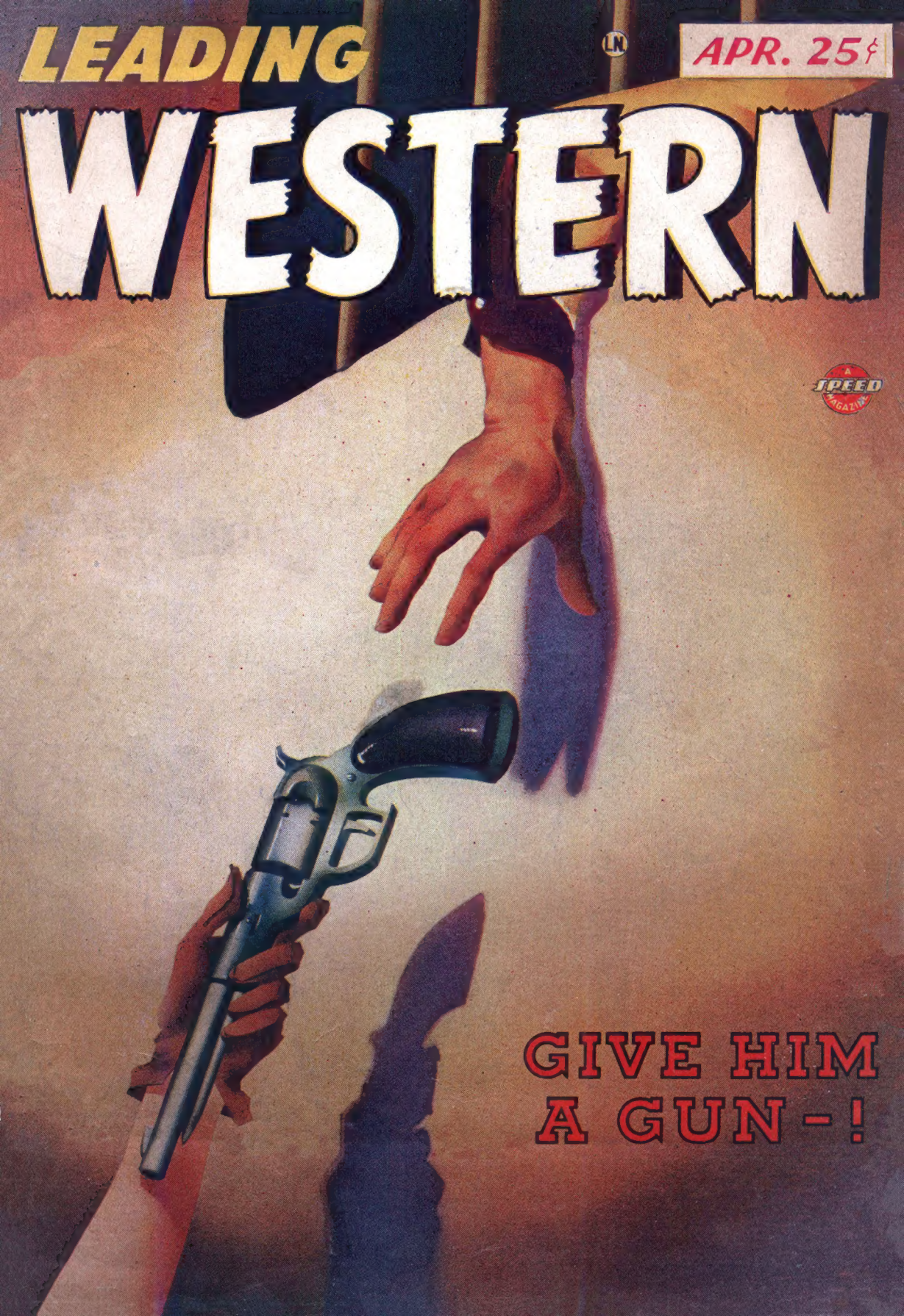
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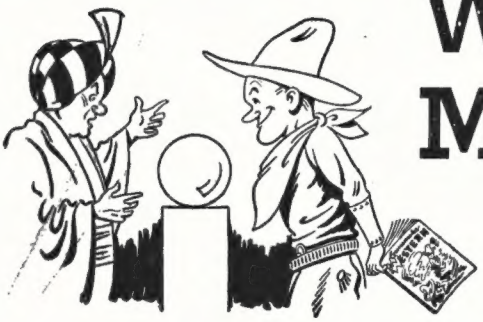

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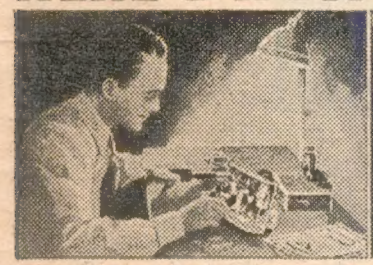

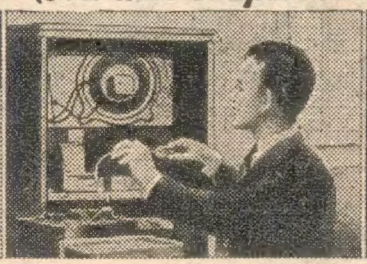

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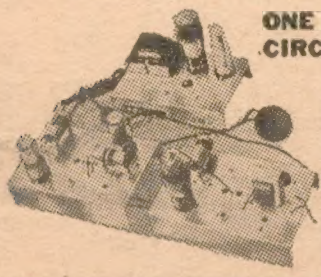

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LEADING WESTERN

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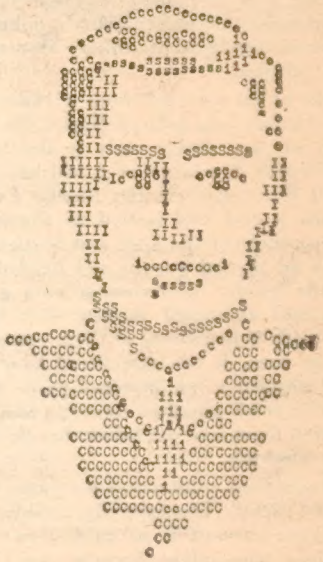

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FORT WHOOP-UP

By JOHN LATANE

THE law against trading whiskey to the Indians in exchange for furs was held lightly by the traders of the northwestern frontier country until the Sixties, when a stern drive by the authorities made breaking the firewater ban a risky business. So many traders moved over the Canadian line into Alberta, from which more comfortable point they went right on supplying the thirsty Montana redskins with alcohol.

One of the most infamous of these conscienceless traders was Johnny Healy. He started out as a whiskey dealer early in the Seventies by purchasing the cargo of a whiskey-loaded Missouri River steamer, the *Amelia Poe*, that had struck a reef and settled to the bottom. Salvaging most of the kegs and bottles, he loaded them on several wagons and headed northward to the border. Government men got wind of this and attempted to beat him to the line. He made it just ahead of them—or so it seemed at the time. It was discovered later on that he had stopped a few hundred yards short of the border as his pursuers closed in and had calmly bluffed them into the belief that he had reached safe territory.

Healy then constructed a trading post on the Belly River, foresightedly building a heavy stockade around it as protection against any Indians who might become too violent from trade firewater. The post became known as Fort Whoop-up, being so named when a trader from Fort Benton, returning from a supply trip to the post, was asked how things were at Healy's and replied, "Man, they're whooping it up!" The trail between Healy's and Fort Benton, which eventually became sixty yards wide at some points, became known as The Whoop-up Trail, and was still to be seen, its wagon ruts overgrown with grass recently.

Fort Whoop-up quickly prospered. But this brought about opposition from the Canadian traders, who refused to give whiskey to the Indians and thus soon began to lose out to Healy. In an attempt to compete, they erected a number of trading posts close by to Fort Whoop-up, and even tried to get the pelts from the Indians by force, dragging them into their posts and making them give up their furs for the calico, beads, guns and powder that hitherto the Indians had found highly desirable.

But all this failed in the face of Whoop-up's powerfully attractive alcoholic offers. So the rival traders got together to find other means of stopping Healy. They organized what they called the Spitzee Cavalry—named after the term the Blackfeet applied to the high land at the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, the Spitzee Country.

ONE day they came down in force against Fort Whoop-up. Healy got word of their coming, immediately went to the main trading house of the post and rolled a large barrel of gunpowder from the storeroom to a place under the counter. He then backed away to a point at the other end of the building, leaving behind him a train of powder, dealt out of a shovel. He sat down, lit a cigar and waited.

In a few minutes the Spitzee Cavalry thundered up to the stockade. Healy had given orders that they were to be admitted and directed to the trading house.

The traders, clutching rifles, fire in their eyes, crowded into the trading house. Healy waved an affable greeting from his chair. "Glad to see you, boys!" he said. "What can I do for you?"

"You can *git*, you snake!" shouted the leader. "There ain't room enough for you and your whiskey in Canada. From now on, the Indians is tradin' with us. We're givin' you a fair chance—we're givin' you twenty-four hours to light out with all your stuff. All, that is, except your firewater—we're pourin' that in the creek!"

"Well," said Healy, "the fact is—I'm staying right here! Unless, of course, all of you want to go right away with me to hell." Reaching down, he held his glowing cigar end close above the powder train. "Get out of my post, gentle like, and don't bother me—or else I'll drop this cigar into this here powder trail! It leads to a right big barrel."

The Spitzee Cavalry, defeated, withdrew. Healy had no further trouble from that quarter.

But there was one outfit that Healy couldn't bluff: the Queen's War Dogs—or, officially, the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. Soon after his brush with the Spitzee Cavalry, the Mounties established Fort MacLeod nearby. They came after the redskin-corruptor with a cannon. This time, Johnny Healy got. In '98, he froze to death on the Yukon.

There is still an acute shortage of the kind of paper on which this magazine is usually printed. Therefore you may find this issue does not seem so thick as before. The publishers want to assure you that there are actually one-third more pages than in early issues, and to ask your forbearance until the paper situation becomes normal.

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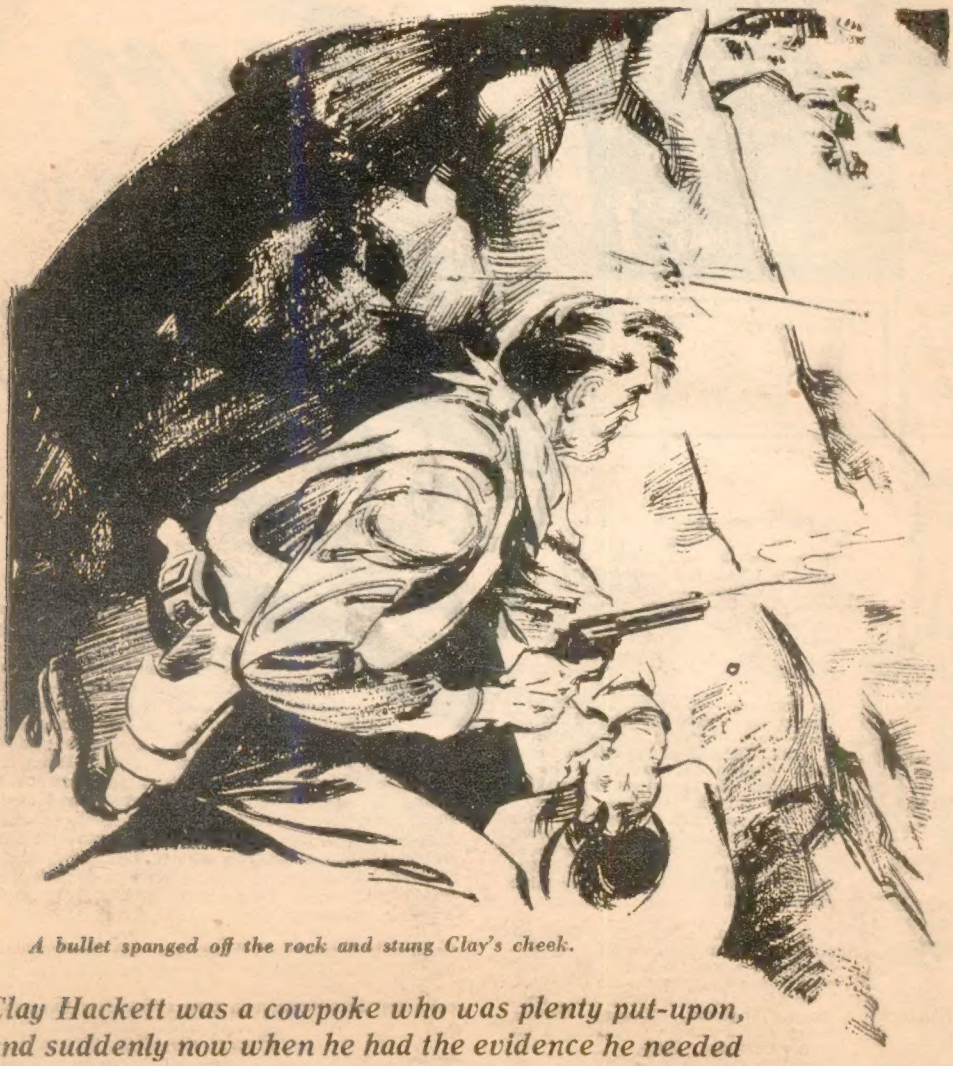


A bullet spanged off the rock and stung Clay's cheek.

Clay Hackett was a cowpoke who was plenty put-upon, and suddenly now when he had the evidence he needed to prevent a hanging he plumb craved to stop, here he was caught like a ringtailed skunk in a trap—with no way out short of disaster! . . .

THERE were three strangers near the livery barn when Clay Hackett turned the horses over to the hostler and came out on Quartzville's main street in the late afternoon sunshine. Two of the strangers were lean and hard-featured. They stood silent and watchful at the edge of the walk. The third man was short and stubby, with a growth of red whiskers on his jowls and a scar across his cheek. He stood in the center of the walk with his feet planted well apart, and a thick, hairy hand resting on his hip close to the jutting handle of his gun.

Another time Clay would have heeded the three and would have moved warily, but now anxiety was riding him hard

By HENRY MALCOLM

Illustrated by
Joseph Sokoli

and his thoughts were with Sally who must by now have reached Al Brant's office and was waiting for him. He started up the walk.

"Just a minute, cowboy," said the stubby man in a flat voice. "I don't like the way you wear your hat. Take it off and jump on it." His eyes were cold.

Clay Hackett halted. "What's the idea?" he asked.

"You heard me, cowboy. I said take your hat off and jump on it."

Clay's eyes shifted from the stubby man to the pair of silent hardcases beyond at the edge of the walk. From their clothes none of the three was a cow-

man. More likely they were miners or belonged to the riffraff of other mining camps lured here to Quartzville by news of the latest gold strike. Of one thing Clay was certain. He had never seen any of them before.

"You've made a mistake," he began. "You've got the wrong man—"

"Don't tell me I made a mistake," cut in the stubby man harshly.

Then Clay Hackett knew that he was in for it. Jumping on his hat would never end this business. That would be merely the lead-up to gunplay, himself against these three. His lean face paled a trifle, and inwardly his muscles began to tighten.

"Wait a minute, Stubby," said one of the others. "We'd better be sure about him. We'd better see the boss first."

The squat man scowled, and stepped aside.

"All right, cowboy. Leave your hat on and drift up the street. Forget about this. Curiosity killed a cat, you know."

Clay moved on up the walk. The advice was good. They had made a mistake, and he'd forget all about it. But just the same a drop of cold sweat oozed down his neck to remind him how close he had been to dying.

THEN he remembered Sally Miller waiting at Al Brant's office, and the stride of his long legs quickened, carrying up the sloping street past the jammed, stinking saloons, and through the milling boisterous crowds that had been drawn to Quartzville afresh by the magnet of virgin gold for the finding.

Al Brant's law office was a one room structure of rough lumber standing just beyond the assayer's office near the head of the street. Clay pushed open the door and paused on the threshold. Sally Miller sat in a chair with her short riding skirt and boots still gray with the dust of their long ride into town from the Broken M. She made a slim, lovely figure as she sat there, her strong, brown fingers toying with her riding gloves. She looked up at Clay and smiled wistfully.

Al Brant lifted his heavy, dignified face with its carefully groomed mustaches and surveyed Clay's tall, dusty figure with penetrating gray eyes. Then a smile changed the heavy face with a lot of pleasant wrinkles, and Al Brant hoisted his two hundred and thirty pounds out of the creaking office chair and extended a pudgy hand. In his long black coat and sober gray waistcoat he looked like a pillar of dignified respectability that seemed somehow out of place in the wild lawlessness that seethed in the Quartzville's fresh, raw, boom-town gold rush.

"It is always a pleasure to see you and Sally, my boy, though I hardly expected you back in town so soon. Sally tells me that her mother is worrying considerably about that mortgage."

"You can almost see her failing from day to day, Mr. Brant," Clay assured him. "If she and Sally lose the Broken M after all the other rotten luck they've had, it will just break her heart. What did you find in Dugan's mining papers, or have you had time to go over them yet? Sally and I felt like we couldn't wait any longer. The mortgage falls due next week, you know."

Al Brant shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, my boy. I was just telling Sally that I found nothing among them. Before Dugan Miller went into the cattle business, he did dabble a bit in mining, but without very good judgment, I'm afraid. He collected a bundle of worthless mining stocks and ownerships to a number of worthless claims. None of them are worth the paper they're printed on."

"But surely there must be something, Mr. Brant!" cried Sally. "There just has to be!"

Al Brant hesitated. Then he sighed and said: "There is a slight possibility, just one and it's so slight that I hate to mention it. Your father, Sally, grubstaked several prospectors. There are written agreements among his papers to prove that he was to share in anything of value they found. Nothing came of them, apparently, and it is very unlikely that anything will because they are all

more than ten years old, dating back to Quartzville's first gold rush. You can see, Sally, that it is nothing on which you and your mother could raise any money to meet the mortgage on the Broken M."

The girl bowed her head, and dabbed furtively at her eyes with her handkerchief. They were all silent, thinking of her father, gaunt old Dugan Miller, and the vicious stroke of Fate that had placed him in prison two years before.

THE engineer of the westbound mail train had seen the Broken M cattle massed on the track ahead when the heavy train thundered out of the Salt Creek cut. He said afterward that a rider was circling the cattle to keep the track blocked, but the engineer was too busy slamming shut the throttle and throwing over the Johnson bar to pay any attention to him.

The instant the train stopped masked men leaped out of the rocks and brush. In the shooting a mail clerk was killed and another critically wounded. The bandits made off with a hundred thousand dollars in cash from the mail car. The engineer and a couple of passengers stalked the rider ahead and found Dugan Miller trying to get his cattle off the track.

Dugan claimed that he didn't even know there was a hold-up. He said he had ridden up from the opposite direction, saw his cattle on the track and investigated. A rider on an unbranded horse had fallen from the saddle. His foot was caught in the stirrup and the horse was dragging him about and growing panicky. In another ten minutes he would have been kicked to death. Dugan cut the rider free and turned to see that his own horse was all right. When he looked around again the stranger had vanished.

Dugan testified in court that he didn't even know there had been a hold-up and had heard no shooting, which wasn't unlikely since the cows were bawling and milling around.

The jury didn't believe Dugan Miller.

The stubby man ordered: "Take off your hat and jump on it, cowboy."

The prosecuting attorney said that Dugan was the rider himself, and that no one but a shrewd old cowman like Dugan Miller would figure out a way to stop the fast mail in that fashion. An unbranded horse was found later with one stirrup cut off, but that didn't mean anything either. The prosecutor said that Dugan could have fixed that before the robbery, and again the jury believed him. Nothing Al Brant, who defended Dugan, could say changed their minds. Especially since none of the other bandits could be found and not a trace of the missing hundred thousand could be located.

So Dugan Miller went to prison for thirty years.

CLAY HACKETT sighed and looked up at the portly, sympathetic lawyer.

"Thanks anyway, Mr. Brant."

"I feel as badly about it as you and Sally do, my boy. I've lain awake nights trying to figure a way out for Mrs. Miller and Sally, but it's no use. I can see no place to get the money."

Sally stood up, a small, slender, pa-

thetic figure. She smiled bravely.

"Thanks so much for what you've done for us already, Mr. Brant," she said. "Some day we'll repay you."

"Don't worry your little head about that," said the lawyer. "I'm not."

Dusk was sifting down from the mighty Squaw Hills and filling the main street of Quartzville when Clay and Sally left Al Brant's office. Yellow lamplight spilled from the saloons out onto the crowds that flowed this way and that along the street. The trampling of booted feet on the board walks formed a dull, unchanging background for the coarse talk, wild shouts, and laughter. The jangle of a tuneless piano in one of the saloons laid a bright thread of sound across the noisy pattern. Far down the street a six-shooter punctured the babel with its dull, flat sound and went unheeded. Dust hung heavy on the air that was now chilly as it moved down from the dark, looming peaks. It burned in the nostrils of Clay and Sally as they started down the street toward the Mansion House.

A couple of drunks leered at the girl as she passed, clinging to Clay's arm. He growled at one of the men who tried to approach her. The drunk teetered away respectfully.

In the lobby of the hotel the air was thick with the blue haze of tobacco smoke, and the odor of cigars and frying steaks and potatoes from the kitchen. Men stood about in groups talking loudly of the latest reported findings over on Manitou Creek. Several paused to stare with brazen admiration at Sally as she and Clay paused at the desk and each registered for a room they were lucky to get.

"I'm going on up and clean up a bit, Clay," said Sally. "I'll be down and we'll have supper in the dining room."

"I'm going out on the street," he said. "I may not be back for a little while. You'd better just go ahead and eat without me."

She nodded, but her troubled eyes followed him out of the door.

He paused outside on the walk fingering the five silver dollars in his pocket. Ma Miller had thrust it upon him when he and Sally left the ranch that morning Up the street the entrance of the Nugget Saloon poured a flood of yellow light out on the sidewalk. Clay thought of the roulette wheel inside, and of the fortunes that crossed the table each night.

Other men had started on a shoe string and run it up into a real stake. He could hold out two dollars to get his and Sally's horses out of the livery barn in the morning. That would leave him three bucks. He could sleep out, if he lost, and he'd gone hungry before. It was worth it just for the chance of helping old Dugan and Ma now when they needed it so desperately. He'd needed their help just as desperately five years ago when he was a sick, discouraged kid riding the grubline trail, and they'd taken him and given him a home.

HE TRAMPED up the street, pushed through the crowd into the Nugget, and wedged into the jam at the roulette table. He watched the ball a moment, then laid his three dollars on the red.

"Red wins," announced the stickman when the wheel ceased rolling. He pushed three silver dollars over beside Clay's little stack.

Clay let it ride. Black came up. The stickman raked the money away from him. Clay hesitated, fingering the last two dollars in his pocket. He hauled them out and laid them on the black. Red came up again. He pushed his way through the crowd away from the table flat broke.

Now he couldn't even get the horses out of hock unless he borrowed from Sally, and he doubted whether she had the money—even if he could bring himself to the idea, which he knew he couldn't.

He stared about him hopefully seeking a familiar face, but they were all strange. He had never known many people in Quartzville, and now with this flood of strangers brought by the lure of gold, he knew no one. Well, he told

himself glumly, it might be possible to borrow that much from Al Brant.

Someone touched Clay's shoulder and he turned sharply to see a stooped, gaunt man, with a gray face standing beside him. Even as Clay glanced at him, the man coughed shallowly into a dirty handkerchief, and the handkerchief came away from his lips stained with crimson.

The six-gun blasted and the gaunt stranger toppled forward across the table.

"I've been looking all over for you," he said weakly. "Come."

He led the way to a table near the door, and seated Clay with his back to it, then dropped exhausted into a chair facing him. He darted a searching look about them at the crowd, and coughed again into his dirty handkerchief. Then he lay in panting exhaustion across the table, while Clay watched him curiously.

The stranger finally roused himself. "You've got to help me. I saw the Broken M horse you left at the livery barn."

Clay's eyes narrowed. "Yeah? What help?"

"I've got to get something to a man who needs it. He helped me out once. You're riding a Broken M horse. You're my only chance because my time is almost up. Lungs, you know."

"What man?"

"His name is Dugan Miller, and he owns the Broken M."

CHAPTER II

Murder!

CLAY HACKETT'S eyes widened. Through his mind flashed the recollection of the papers Al Brant had mentioned a little while ago. His pulse began to hammer.

"You're one of the men Dugan grubstaked!" he exclaimed.

The stranger's burning eyes darted about the room searching the crowd as though afraid of finding what they sought. On the little stage at the far end of the room a girl appeared in the blue fog of tobacco smoke, a girl in a spangled dress who smiled and made ready for her song. A wild shout arose, shaking the rafters of the big, flimsy building. The stranger turned back to face Clay.

"I've made a map for him. All the names and directions are on it. Dugan won't have any trouble finding it. Promise me you'll deliver it to him. Swear that you'll never breathe a word about it to anyone else. Promise?"

"Mister," said Clay huskily. "I'll promise anything that will help Dugan Miller."

"Here it is," muttered the stranger. "Guard it with your life."

His clawlike hand slid palm down across the rough table top. Clay saw the ends of the folded paper showing on either side of it and reached forward.

As he did so, a six-gun blasted past his ear. The gaunt stranger reared up, his mouth gaping in a scream that never came, and he toppled forward across the table. The bony fingers clutching the map went limp.

A hairy hand at the end of a long arm shot out over Clay's shoulder and grabbed the map. Clay clutched wildly for it. He leaped up, overturning his chair. The owner of the hand knocked him against the wall.

Clay recovered and twisted about. Only the swinging batwing doors showed where the murderer had been. Clay glanced down at the gaunt man lying dead across the table in a growing pool of crimson that was beginning to drip over the edge to the floor. Clay shoved his hand deep in his pocket, then withdrew it, whipped out his gun and plunged through the door into the crowd on the sidewalk.

There was no sign of the killer. Shootings were much too common to disturb the crowd outside. Clay stared about wildly. A disturbance down the street caught his eye. He plunged toward it, elbowing people out of his way as he ran.

At the end of a hundred yards he drew up sharply. Town Marshal Luke Fageol, with his tin star twinkling its warning in the light from a nearby store window, blocked the way, a huge figure with the six-shooter in his massive fist leveled at Clay's chest.

"What's the hurry?" asked the marshal in a deep raspy voice.

"Which way did he go?" panted Clay.

"Drop that gun," said Luke Fageol. Clay obeyed. "Now," added the marshal, "which way did who go?"

"A jasper who just now murdered a man in the Nugget Saloon."

"You're the only one I saw running," said the marshal.

"Not me! I was talking to the man when someone shot him over my shoulder."

"We'll go back and see about it," said Luke Fageol. "March ahead of me, and don't try to stampede."

THE crowd parted to make a path, then fell in behind Luke Fageol and his prisoner and crowded into the Nugget after them. Killings were a common business in Quartzville, but this one seemed a little different.

The body of the dead man had been carried away, and a swamper was cleaning the table and floor. Clay looked around and saw Drolling, the owner of the Nugget, standing massive and immaculate in his flowered waistcoat at the end of the bar, watching him. Drolling's little eyes were inscrutable and his face impassive. He chewed a big unlighted cigar.

Drolling and Luke Fageol looked at each other, and Clay felt that there was some understanding between them although nothing was said. Clay had heard of Luke Fageol and the way he ruled Quartzville with a ruthless gun. Drolling owned the biggest saloon in town. Some people said that between them there was

a secret understanding, and that the crimes that were committed in Quartzville were done with their knowledge. No one knew the truth.

Drolling removed the thick, unlighted cigar from his mouth and spoke.

"You sure fetched him pronto, Luke. He dug out of here right after the killing."

"Why, you—" shouted Clay.

"Shut up," cut in Luke Fageol harshly. "How'd it happen, Drolling?"

"I didn't see it, but a couple of customers did. Here you two. Step up and tell the law what happened."

squat little man with a scarred face and a growth of red whisker came forward. Clay's eyes widened for this was the gunman who had called him out down at the livery barn. The man with him was one of the two who had stood silently at the edge of the walk. Of the third man there was no sign.

The third man was the murderer, Clay told himself. He was the one who had snatched the map and fled. The three of them must have been following the lunger waiting a chance to get the map from him.

The man, Stubby, paused and looked at Clay with derision in his hard eyes. Then he said to Luke Fageol:

"Me and my partner here were at the bar. I happened to look around. This jasper had pulled a gun and was giving the lunger the works. Some hombre tried to grab him, but this jasper knocked him against the wall and ran out of the door. The hombre got up and ran after him."

"I was the one who was knocked against the wall," Clay said.

"I'm a law-abiding citizen," said Stubby loudly. "No hairpin is going to call me a liar." He motioned toward his gun.

Instantly Luke Fageol's iron covered him.

"We got law in Quartzville," said the marshal coldly. "We'll put this bird in the cooler and when Judge Day gets back in the morning, we'll have the trial. Will you two be on hand to give evidence, or had I better lock you up to be sure you will be here?"

He banged the rock across Kench's temple and the man went over, out.

"We'll be in court," said Stubby piously. "Me and my pard are honest, law-abiding citizens and we feel it's our duty to give evidence in a cold-blooded killing like this."

Cold with fury Clay remained silent while Luke Fageol led him away. Everything was cut and dried, he could see that. These two wanted him out of the way—or thought they did—and they were going to see that it was done legally. He wondered if Luke Fageol had a hand in this, a secret hand that didn't show. And maybe Drolling, too. Clay knew what he faced in the miner's court. It concerned itself with speed and ruthless efficiency, and the swift application of the hangman's noose rather than with justice.

"I've got to get word to Al Brant," Clay told Luke Fageol when they came to the jail.

"Old Walkin' Dignity, huh?" said Luke Fageol. "All right. Hey, Butch, trot over and tell Al Brant he's got a customer."

The unshaven deputy departed grumbling. Luke Fageol locked Clay in a cell and went back to his desk. Clay waited

till he heard the papers rustling and knew the marshal was occupied, then he thrust his hand deep into his pocket and brought out a piece of wrinkled paper which he smoothed out carefully on his bunk and struck a match to examine.

It was half the map the stranger had tried to give Clay. His wild grab had saved half of it when the murderer seized it.

CHAPTER III

Jail Break

TWO parallel lines were drawn from the top of the sheet to the bottom and beside the ragged, torn edge were the letters "yon." Clay decided that these lines represented a canyon, and the three letters were part of the word "canyon" naming it. Near the bottom of the sheet in the right wall of the canyon was an indentation containing an X and the word "here."

Before the mouth of the indentation were little circles labeled "brush" and "rocks." Just to the left of this in the canyon proper were the words "one mile to here."

Clay memorized the map till the match flame singed his fingers, then touched it to the paper letting it burn to ashes which he ground out on the floor with his boot heel. He lay down on the bunk to think things over.

The murderer had the half of the map that told the name and location of the canyon. Clay had the part showing where the mine, or claim, was located in it. Each had the other hogtied, for neither had enough knowledge to find it.

Things would begin to pop at the trial next morning. Stubby and his friends wouldn't be so eager to have him hanged when they discovered that their part of the map wasn't complete. Somehow he had to use his knowledge of the mine's location to save himself, but just how this was to be done he couldn't see. He wondered what their next move would be. The boss would arrange that, probably. But who was the boss? Luke Fageol? Drolling? Or maybe both of them? Both, or either, held a position to boss a gang of renegades preying on defenseless miners.

Al Brant arrived a little later. Luke Fageol picked up the lamp from the desk and brought him back to the cell. The portly, dignified lawyer's eyes went wide at the sight of Clay behind the bars.

"Clay Hackett!" he exclaimed. "What's this?"

Clay told him about the murder and his arrest. Al Brant turned inquiringly to Luke Fageol.

"Evidence is evidence," said the marshal gruffly. "Two men say they saw the shooting. They'll be in court in the morning. He was the only one I saw running away from the Nugget."

Al Brant shook his head in dismay. "This is bad, my boy, very bad. But don't give up hope just yet. With a street filled with people, someone must have seen the real murderer run out of the Nugget ahead of you. I'll go out and see if I can locate some witnesses."

"I'd like to speak to you alone, Mr. Brant, if the marshal don't mind," said Clay.

"I don't mind," said Luke Fageol surlily and walked away.

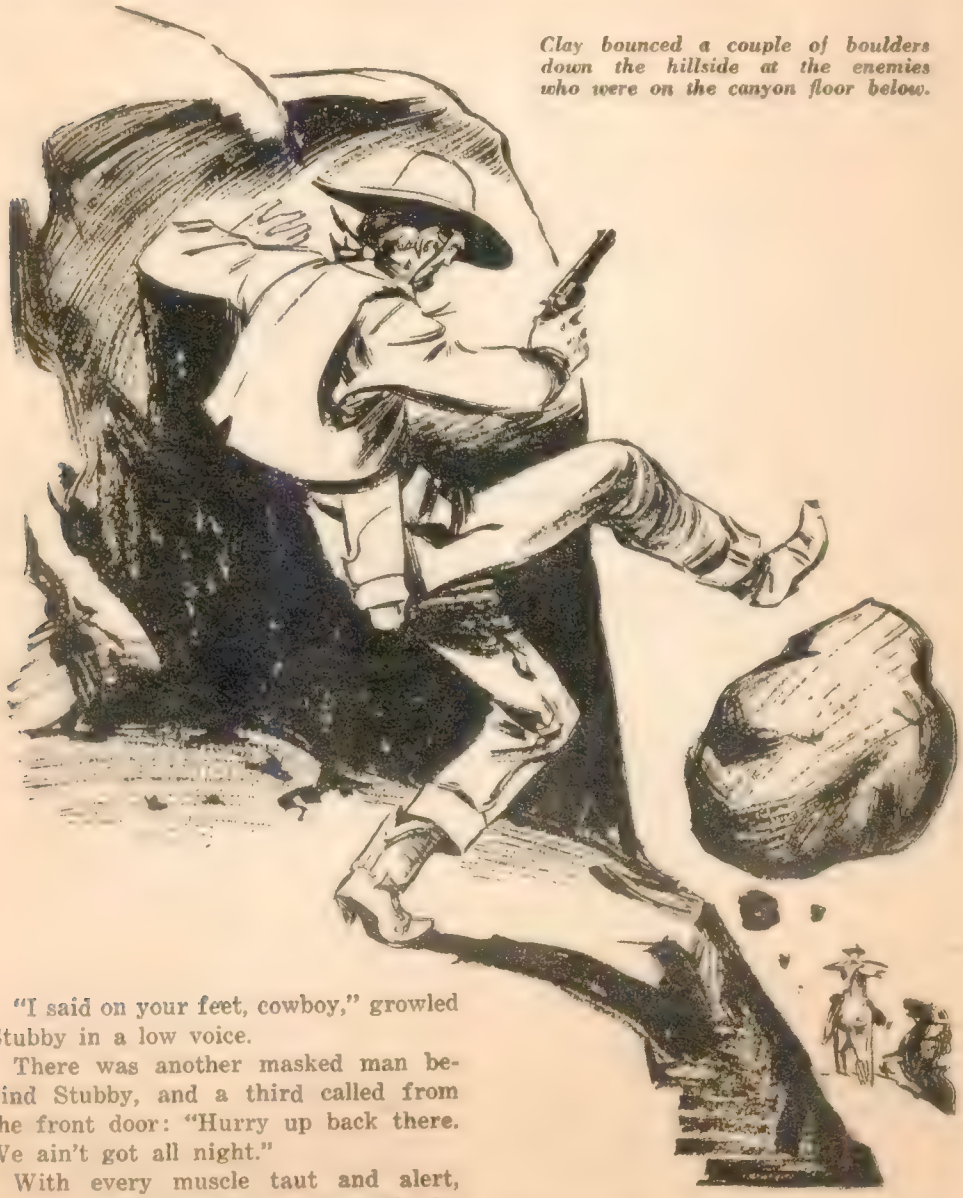
"Sally's at the hotel," explained Clay. "She doesn't know anything about this, and I wish you wouldn't tell her. It'll only worry her, and she's got enough trouble already."

"Of course not, my boy. We'll say nothing to Sally. I'll go out and round up those witnesses, and after you're freed, you can tell her about it yourself on the way out to the Broken M."

After the lawyer departed, Clay lay down in his bunk satisfied that he'd done what he could. As he was drowsing off, he thought he heard Luke Fageol leave the jail, but he wasn't certain.

SOMEONE prodded Clay in the ribs. "On your feet, cowboy," growled a familiar voice.

Clay was wide awake at once. The renegade, Stubby, his scarred face covered with a bandanna, leaned over him. Stubby's gun was prodding Clay's ribs.



Clay bounced a couple of boulders down the hillside at the enemies who were on the canyon floor below.

"I said on your feet, cowboy," growled Stubby in a low voice.

There was another masked man behind Stubby, and a third called from the front door: "Hurry up back there. We ain't got all night."

With every muscle taut and alert, Clay pretended sleepiness. Groggily he stood up and walked out of the cell.

The unshaven deputy lay crumpled in the corner with a huge bump on his head pushing up his uncombed hair. At the door Clay lunged abruptly against Stubby and grabbed for his gun. He got his hand on the weapon, and out of the corner of his eye glimpsed the sweeping blow of the second man's gun.

Clay ducked desperately. The gun barrel struck his head. There was an explosion inside his skull, and he plunged down into a bottomless black pit.

When he opened his eyes again, the blurred stars were wheeling crazily in the black sky. He shut his eyes again while pain surged through his head like a wild horse stampede. As he lay fighting the agony of it, he became aware that Stubby was talking.

"I tell you it ain't on him anywhere. I've been through his pockets three

times. Either he lost it, or he never had it in the first place and you just thought he did, Selpp."

"I tell you he grabbed half of it," said Selpp violently. "I felt the map tear when I jerked away."

"But maybe it was Barrett's dead fingers that froze onto it," argued Stubby. "We ought to go back to the undertaker's and look over the corpse again."

Selpp cursed savagely. "I tell you it ain't on Barrett's body! I went back to the undertaker's twice and hunted. I'd have gone again, but the undertaker was getting suspicious."

"Cussin' won't help," said Stubby grimly. "The boss said get that map, and we ain't got it. Now what do we do? I say push on to Gunsmoke Canyon and start hunting again."

They argued. The pain in Clay's head was passing. He could hear the distant jumble of men's voices and the occasional tinkle of an out-of-tune piano. He judged that he'd been carried up the mountainside above Quartzville.

"Maybe he's come to by now and we can ask him about it," suggested Selpp.

They leaned over Clay while one struck a match. Selpp fingered Clay's limp wrist.

"Pretty good pulse. What do you think, Stubby?"

"Snap out of it, cowboy," said the little man sharply. He gave Clay's arm a savage pinch.

Clay responded with a faint groan. Stubby pinched again with savage brutality. The pain was agonizing, but Clay's response was even fainter.

"Dang it, Kench," said Stubby. "You didn't need to hit him so hard. Skull's probably cracked. Like as not he's dying right now. Maybe we better take him down to the boss."

"Carry him down that hill again and maybe get seen and shot at?" Kench protested. "Not me! Let him die up here where he won't be found so quick. It ain't so much work."

"Then you stay here with him," said Stubby. "Selpp and me will go down and powwow with the boss."

THEY moved off down the slope in the darkness toward the lights of the town. Kench settled himself comfortably with his back to Clay and built himself a smoke. When the match flamed in his cupped hands, Clay glimpsed his profile and recognized him as the second man who had stood at the edge of the walk behind Stubby at the livery barn. The match went out.

Clay felt cautiously about in the darkness till he found a small rock. He rose up wavering to his knees. A pebble dislodged by his toe made a sharp sound in the night.

Kench jerked his head wildly about and tried to duck. There was no mistake or hesitancy in Clay's aim. He banged the rock across Kench's temple, and the man went over sideways.

Clay found the wrist and found the pulse still beating. Then he dragged off the man's gun and belt, stood up shakily, and buckled them about his own lean middle. He staggered off downhill toward town.

There was a light in Al Brant's office when Clay reached the dark alley between two buildings across the street and leaned exhaustedly against the nearest wall and closed his eyes against the dull throbbing of his head.

When he opened them again, he peered out of the darkness and he saw that the crowds on the street had thinned out. A couple of drunks staggered past. Down street at the Nugget Saloon Clay could see vaguely a couple of men talking in the shadow beside the porch. Presently they stepped into the light. He recognized them as Luke Fageol and Drolling. Drolling went back into the saloon and Luke Fageol moved on down the street, making a hulking figure in the uncertain light from the nearby buildings.

For the moment the street seemed safe. Clay walked across it and knocked softly on the door of Al Brant's office.

After a moment the key turned in the lock and the door opened a few inches. Al Brant peered out at him, then threw the door wide.

"Clay Hackett," he exclaimed "keeping his voice down. "Come in! Hurry up, my boy. Luke Fageol is upsetting the whole town for you and is threatening to shoot you on sight. Get inside before he sees you."

Clay entered and sat down on the nearest chair while Al Brant locked the door again. Then the lawyer came and stood before him portly and dignified as always, but with concern in his eyes.

"What happened, my boy? How did you get out of jail? I couldn't find a single man who would admit that he saw anyone but yourself run out of the Nugget after the shooting. I've been nearly ready to give up hope, and have been sitting here wracking my brain for an idea and wishing that you were here. Then like an answer to my wish you knocked at the door. How did you manage it?"

"I didn't," confessed Clay. "Three strangers managed it for me and cracked me over the head to boot. They were looking for something I didn't have. Two of them left to come down into town and talk with their boss whoever he is, and I laid the other out with a rock."

"What were they searching for?"

"A piece of map they thought the man who was killed gave me, but I didn't have it."

"A map of what, my boy? This doesn't make sense."

"A map of a mine or a claim this lunger, who was dying, wanted Dugan Miller to have. Dugan must have grubstaked him some time. The murderer grabbed it and ran."

Al Brant stared at him. "This is the most curious thing I ever heard," he said at last. "Are you sure you're feeling all right, my boy? Maybe that blow on your head—"

"I'm all right," Clay interrupted impatiently. "I've still got a headache, but that's all. I need a horse."

"But this mine. Where is it?"

"In Gunsmoke Canyon. I'm going there to try to locate it."

"Really," said the lawyer with a doubtful shake of his head, "you're in no shape for such a trip. You had best tell me where you think it is and I'll send a party out to file on it for Dugan Miller."

"No, Mr. Brant," said Clay doggedly. "This is going to be my job and mine alone. Dugan and Ma Miller have done a lot for me, and this is my chance to square up part of that debt."

Al Brant nodded. "Of course. I hadn't thought of it in that light. It is your right. Now I can get a few trustworthy men to accompany you—"

"I can't wait. I want a horse and supplies right away so I can get out of town before morning."

"I'll have the horse and supplies here inside an hour."

"One thing more before I forget it," said Clay. "Sally ought to go home first thing in the morning before some of the gang discover that she's Dugan's daughter and is in town with me."

"You're right," agreed the lawyer.

After Al Brant left, Clay stood at the door a long moment staring out. He could see Drolling outside his saloon staring about as though looking for someone. Clay closed the door, and sat down in the chair at Al Brant's desk to wait.

The lawyer returned in half an hour, entering through the rear door.

"The horse and supplies are outside," he said. "You'd better move carefully. Luke Fageol stopped me and asked your name and all about you. I'm afraid he saw the horse, and may have already guessed who it's for."

CHAPTER IV

Trapped!

AT DAWN Clay stopped at a little creek and stepped down stiffly from the saddle in the chill morning air. He was tired, but the ache in his head was nearly gone. The horse sank its muzzle gratefully in the clear, cold current of the little stream. Clay set about making a fire and cooking bacon and coffee. He

hadn't eaten in forty-eight hours and he was nearly famished.

After he finished, he gave the horse a feed of oats, and washed up the skillet and coffee pot. He tied them to the supplies behind his saddle and mounted again. He headed north toward the new range of hills that loomed ahead in purple grandeur like a mighty wall, a wall with a titanic cleft in it. He was heading toward this cleft, for it was Gunsmoke Canyon.

By midmorning he caught the first glimpse of the dust plume far behind and knew that he was being followed.

"Luke Fageol got out a posse," he told himself grimly.

The dust cloud grew, and Clay knew that the men must be pushing their horses. He'd heard of posses from Quartzville running a man down fifty or a hundred miles away from town, holding court where they found him, and swinging him from the nearest limb.

The vast gateway of the canyon drew closer, and Clay passed through it at a hard gallop, holding to the almost indiscernible trail through rocks and bushes, while on either hand the sloping walls towered into the clear blue sky. There were plenty of rocks and brush along the base of the left slope.

The map said one mile to go. Clay estimated it and presently reined in staring at a sheer cliff. The mine must be over there. He swung off the trail and crossed the quarter mile of open ground to the mass of boulders and brush. He pushed through it, and his heart sank, for there was no sign of a shaft in the bottom of the cliff, only more brush.

At one spot the brush looked darker. Clay rode forward and pulled a branch aside. Then he grinned, for he found himself looking into a cavern large enough to admit his horse.

He turned back to the rocks, dismounted and clambered up among them to watch the trail and the mouth of the canyon.

Three riders came into view, riding hard, their horses dark with sweat. Clay's eyes narrowed. This didn't look like a posse. Presently he recognized Stubby, Kench, and Selpp. They passed, still following the trail and riding heads down to read sign.

Clay stared after them. Al Brant must have been mistaken about Luke Fageol seeing him and the horse last night. Or was he? It looked a lot more as though Luke Fageol might have set these three on his trail.

They reined in suddenly and cut back for sign. They rode slowly now, hanging far out of the saddle to see the ground. Stubby gave a sudden shout and wheeled off the trail toward the rocks. The others followed. Clay's hand dropped to his holstered gun, then came away. H knew that he couldn't bushwhack them without warning.

He slid down the boulders, caught up the reins and hurried to the mouth of the cave. Pulling aside the branches, he broke one off, as he led the horse into the cool depths. The opening was now plainly revealed.

Stubby and his companions came up to the opposite side of the boulders fifty feet away. Clay could hear them dismounting and climbing through the rocks. A bush stirred, then Stubby's voice shouted excitedly:

"There's a cave here! That's where he's gone. No wonder we couldn't find it before. Come on!"

Clay lifted his gun and squeezed the trigger. The thunder of the weapon was so deafening in the close confines of the cave that even the gunwise horse jerked up his head in alarm. A leaf, cut off by the flying lead, floated down slowly to the ground beside the bush that had stirred.

A volley of shots answered him, and one bullet spanged off the rock so near Clay's head that his cheek stung with flying stone dust. Silence followed. Then Stubby called out:

"All right, cowboy. You can either come out now with your hands up, or we'll wait till you starve out."

CLAY'S answer was to send another bullet into the bush. A taunting laugh answered him, and after that there was silence.

Clay reloaded the two empty chambers of his gun, and counted the cartridges in his belt. There were nine. He was in a bad way for a siege. The canteen hanging from the saddle horn was full, and there were supplies enough to last him for several days. But in the end it all came to the same thing: surrender or starvation.

Wearily he holstered the gun, and gathered up rocks lying about the floor of the cave, piling them up in a barricade in the entrance shoulder-high. That would stop them from rushing him, and would stop their bullets, too. Someone shot at him once, and the bullet ricocheted off the barricade harmlessly.

After that they were apparently content to let it go as a siege.

Clay unsaddled the horse, removed the bridle, and gave the animal a feed of oats. Then for the first time he began to look about the cave for some sign of the vein of ore. Suddenly he stiffened and stared. Against the wall of the cave stood two stuffed canvas pouches with leather bottoms. On their sides were the words "US Mail."

Unbelievingly Clay knelt down and touched them, then dragged them to the entrance to examine them. The locks were still intact, but the straps that closed the tops had been cut. He pulled out the top bundle of currency, blew the dust off it and stared at the denomination of the yellow-backed bill. It bore a $100 mark.

Clay stared dazedly about him. This was no mine at all nor even a claim. It was the hiding place of the money from the train hold-up near Salt Fork two years ago. No wonder there had been no trace of the loot that had lain here for two years, while old Dugan Miller was held caged behind prison bars for its theft and loss. But how—why—?

Something glimmered whitely on the floor where the pouches had stood. Clay picked it up and found that it was a letter. He brought it to the light and opened it.

"To Dugan Miller or whoever finds this," he read. "This is the money from the mail train robbery at Salt Fork Cut. It was the boss's idea to have me take the money and hide it in a place he picked out among the rocks along Salt Creek, but I saw the look he gave Stubby and Kench when he said it. I knew they were figuring to rub me out as soon as the robbery was over and I got the money hid for them. I didn't know what I was getting into anyway when they made me a proposition. I haven't but a few years to live at most because the doctors tell me one lung is nearly gone already.

"Dugan Miller saved my life when he cut me loose from my horse among the cattle on the track. I managed to get away and took the money while the others slipped back to Quartzville and showed up at the saloons there and established themselves an alibi. I took care of the money because I was not known in this part of the country.

"But they caught on pretty quick and picked up my trail. I beat them here to Gunsmoke Canyon and got the money here in the cave. They are camped out in the canyon right now hunting for me, but I don't think they can find this cave because it's too well hid. I haven't got much food left, and no horse. He broke his leg at the mouth of the canyon and I had to carry the pouches the rest of the way.

"If I get out of here alive, I am going to Dugan Miller and tell him where the money is hidden so that he can clear himself of what people must think of him. It will be little enough to do for him saving my life, even though I have not very many years to live.

Signed—

E. Barrett"

Clay folded the letter slowly and put it in his pocket. He stared at the money. He had everything at his fingertips now to clear Dugan Miller's name and get

him out of prison. The reward for the return of the money would more than take care of the mortgage on the Broken M. But he was trapped here like a rat, and like a rat they would kill him here or starve him.

At the realization he groaned and buried his face in his hands.

OUTSIDE a gun blasted and a bullet slammed into the barricade. A taunting laugh followed.

"Just wanted to let you know we're still here, cowboy."

Now old Dugan would die in prison, thought Clay bitterly. He'd never outlive that thirty-year sentence. Creditors would take the Broken M, and Ma and Sally would be shoved out into a friendless world. All her life Sally would believe that Clay had failed them when he didn't come back.

Now Clay realized that he shouldn't have been so selfish about coming alone to Gunsmoke Canyon. He should have taken Al Brant's advice and at least have brought some men with him.

The thought drove him to pace back and forth in anguish. All the way through he had failed, and this was the end.

He began to wonder how Barrett had gotten out of here when he was trapped in this same spot by the same three renegades. He wondered, too, why Barrett had waited two years before trying to get in touch with Dugan Miller. But mostly Clay wondered how he got out of the cave and made good his escape.

They would be waiting out there for him. Barrett must have waited till night and crept down the canyon past them. Yet another idea kept bothering Clay. Suppose there was another way out of this cave? He hadn't investigated because Barrett's crudely drawn map had shown but one entrance.

Clay stared into the blackness beyond the horse. For the first time he became aware of a faint breath of air on his cheek, hot air from the canyon outside flowing into the cave. There was a second opening!

Frantically Clay saddled the horse again, and bound the mail pouches to its back with the lass rope. If the back passage was large enough to permit the animal's passage, he was ready to go. The dozen matches in his pocket would have to be enough to show the way.

He took a last look outside. Everything was quiet. Picking up the reins, he started cautiously back into the black depths, lighting an occasional match to peer ahead, and sliding his feet along cautiously.

The passage sloped up sharply, and grew smaller until Clay heard the ominous whisper of the mail pouches rubbing against the rock walls. He halted. Should the passage grow much smaller, the horse might wedge itself in, and couldn't even back out. He lit another precious match and looked about.

The walls seemed now closer together ahead. He decided to venture a little farther.

Two yards more, and his foot slid off the edge underfoot. A wild thrill shot up Clay's spine. He got another match and struck it.

The crack underfoot dropped only a few inches to another rock floor of a second cavern. This one was larger and angled up and off to the left. In the distance the blackness was tinged with a spot of gray that hinted at daylight.

Clay moved ahead, leading the horse. After a hundred yards or so he came to the second opening of the cave, heavily screened with brush, and pushed his way out into the open.

He found himself at the bottom of a steep-sided, narrow ravine choked with brush and rocks. Ages ago this ravine had been part of the cave, but the roof had fallen in, letting in the outside world.

HE MOVED ahead, threading his way among the rocks and bushes and leading the horse after him, and presently emerged on the sloping canyon wall three hundred feet above the canyon floor. Down there he could see the groundtied horses of his besiegers, but

the edge of the sheer cliff above the cave mouth screened the men themselves from his sight.

Clay grinned triumphantly and turned up the slope toward the rim. As soon as he reached it, he would be safe. They'd wonder where he'd gone and how, before they'd figure it out, he'd be well out of their reach.

The faint, flat crack of a Winchester shattered the silence. Dust spurted from the ground a few yards to his right. A savage yell floated up from the canyon floor.

Wildly Clay jerked his head over his shoulder. Two of the renegades were plunging for their horses, while the third man had dropped to his knee to steady his rifle for the next shot. Smoke whipped out thinly from the muzzle. Clay heard the vicious whine of flying lead, and the sound of the shot hard on it.

He yelled back at his laden horse, and plunged frantically up the slope, zigzagging to spoil the gunman's aim. When he looked back again, the two had mounted and were spurring their horses up the steep slope in pursuit, while the third man was running for his horse to follow them.

Clay stared anxiously up the slope at the rim. He'd never reach its safety now.

CHAPTER V

Fageol Shows His Hand

FRANTICALLY he started ahead, yanking the horse after him. Bullets were cutting the air about him like angry bees as the two leading riders hauled out saddle guns and opened up. A bullet slapped a mail pouch on the horse's back with an explosion of dust.

If he could only halt them momentarily, he could make the rim, Clay told himself. Up there from its shelter he could wait and use his six-shooter effectively when they came in range. He sighted a cluster of rocks on the slope a little to his right, and swerved toward it.

A bullet slashed the brim of his hat as he reached its shelter. Now it was Clay's turn to grin as he loosened a hundred pound boulder and gave it a push, sending it bounding down the slope. Another followed.

His pursuers saw the rocks coming and swerved out of the way to safety, but their horses reared up in panic, turned and charged wildly downhill, nearly throwing their riders.

This was the thing Clay had dared hope for. Catching his horse's reins again he plunged on up the steep hillside, almost dragging the nervous, snorting animal after him by sheer strength. He was a fair target again for the three below, and they opened up on him with blasting carbines. Bullets kicked up the dirt about him as he finally topped the rim and dropped panting to the ground while the sweating horse drooped its head with heaving lungs.

Down in the canyon a violent argument was going on between the three. Presently one man slid his toe in the stirrup to start up the slope again. Clay got up. There were loose boulders up here, too. He pushed a couple of them over the edge and watched them go thundering and bouncing down to the canyon floor far below. The man who had placed his toe in the stirrup withdrew it and joined the argument again after the missiles of thundering destruction rolled harmlessly past him.

Clay caught up the reins of his horse and headed across the narrow plateau into the hills. They would be after him in no time, overhauling him swiftly on their horses while he plodded along on foot leading his mount. His only chance was to lose himself in the wild fastnesses of the hills.

ALL THAT day he pushed ahead, swinging in a vast circle that would bring him back to Quartzville. He avoided open ground and the skyline where he could be spotted, and clung to the creeks and covering of trees and brush.

They were hot on his trail and he knew it. Once he saw them on the shoul-

der of a hill scanning the country for him while he hid in a thicket and let his horse munch grass. Another time he heard them clattering up a nearby gully while he hid in a clump of pines with his hand on his horse's muzzle to keep it quiet.

That night he made a cold camp in a lonely little valley west of Quartzville, and in the morning moved in cautiously toward town. He was limping badly. His high-heeled boots had worn great blisters on his feet, and he was ready to drop from exhaustion.

There was no sign of pursuit this morning, but he moved warily, watching with hollow eyes that burned hawklike in his gaunt, unshaven face. At last he came out on a fringe of trees high on the shoulder of the mountain and saw far below him the shabby, little huddle of buildings lined along its one street, that was Quartzville.

Throughout the day he lay among the trees waiting, and when the great golden ball of the sun at last drifted down between two snow-clad peaks to the west and disappeared, bringing the chill mountain night swiftly upon the hills, he saddled the horse again, and bound the mail pouches upon it.

Down the slope he picked his way, while the lights of Quartzville winked to life and in the darkness the town gleamed like a cluster of fireflies to lure him on. He limped cautiously under the great burning stars, listening and straining his eyes in the darkness. Presently he could hear the confused sounds of the crowds in town, and presently the familiar banging of the tinny piano.

He came to the upper end of the street and paused in the inky shadow of a giant rock outcropping. He was less than a hundred feet now from Al Brant's law office and safety, and he was utterly weary. Yet he couldn't relax now, not till he reached it. He had only to move down the slope in the darkness behind the buildings paralleling the street, but he wanted to be certain that this upper end of the street was empty so that there would be no one to hear him and become curious.

As soon as he turned the money over to Al Brant, most of his troubles would be over, because the lawyer would know just what to do about getting Dugan Miller out of prison in the shortest possible time. It was a good thing that this lawless town had a few good, solid citizens like Al Brant to throw their influence to the side of law and order.

Clay stepped forward and looked down the street. Abruptly he jerked back into the shadow again. Two men were standing down the street less than fifty feet from him. Clay peered out of the shadow at them. The shorter man struck a light for his cigarette. The light showed his face. He was Stubby. His companion was the hulking Luke Fageol.

Swift anger swept through Clay. So Luke Fageol was the boss after all and had put Stubby, Kench, and Selpp on Clay's trail. Now Stubby was back to report that Clay had gotten away with the money. Clay's hand dropped to the holstered gun on his hip, and came away again. This wasn't his job—yet. First he had to get the money to Al Brant, then he could go out and hunt them down.

Luke Fageol and Stubby moved off down the street together. Clay waited till they had passed the assayer's office, then led his horse with its hundred-thousand-dollar burden through the darkness down the slope behind the buildings to Al Brant's office. A yellow crack of light showed at the bottom of the door. Clay knocked softly.

THERE was a little delay, and the door opened cautiously. Al Brant looked out, holding a small derringer in his fist.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"It's me, Clay Hackett."

A girl cried out inside the office, and Sally Miller came running to the door.

"Clay, Clay! Oh, I knew you'd come back! I wouldn't go home because I knew it, even though Mr. Brant tried to make me."

Clay stepped into the office. Al Brant

backed away, staring at him queerly.

"Sally, I found it!" said Clay.

"The mine?" she asked eagerly.

"No. The foot from the train robbery. A hundred thousand dollars. I've got it here. We'll have your dad out of prison in no time."

She stared at him, her face going white as the full realization of his words came upon her.

"You mean the money from the Salt Fork hold-up?" asked Al Brant, staring at him. "You've got it *here?*"

Clay nodded. "It's on the horse out there and still in the mail pouches. We'll bring it in, and you can take charge of it. You'll know what to do to get it back to the railroad company, or wherever it goes, and collect the reward for Ma and Sally. And it won't take long to get Dugan out of the pen, will it?"

"Of course not, my boy! Why, this is simply incredible. By all means we must get the money inside."

He ran out the door, his dignity forgotten. Clay joined him and they carried the heavy pouches into the office and placed them on the floor against the wall. Al Brant could scarcely keep his eyes off them.

"That man who was shot while talking to you in the Nugget Saloon, Clay, must have been the same one whose life Dugan saved," he said jovially. "I happened to learn his name today: Emery Barrett. For the past two years he has been in the Deer Lodge Penitentiary and was released because he was dying of consumption and had served half his term."

"That's right," said Clay. "That's what he said in his letter."

"What letter?" asked the lawyer quickly.

"The one Barrett left with the money, explaining everything."

"Let me see it!"

Clay fished in his pockets. "I was followed," he explained as he searched. "They thought they had me trapped in the cave, but I found a way out. Here it is."

Al Brant seized the letter and hurried to the desk and held it close to the lamp. Clay turned to Sally who was looking up at him with shining eyes.

"Sally—" he began, and broke off at the sound of boot heels pounding up the board walk outside. Someone beat frantically at the front door.

"Let me in! Hurry!"

Al Brant jerked up his heavy face and stared at the door. Then he stepped forward, unlocked it, and pulled it open. Stubby, the scarred little renegade, almost fell inside. He slammed the door behind him and locked it.

"Boss," he said excitedly to Al Brant. "I was on my way here to tell you that cowboy got away from us after all, when Luke Fageol picked me up. I ditched him, but—"

He broke off, staring at Clay and Sally. Clay's eyes widened with a swift, horrible understanding of what the words meant, and he turned to Al Brant. All the dignity and respectability had vanished from the lawyer's face. It was no longer a mask for him to hide behind. The true Al Brant, the rogue and outlaw, stood revealed in the vicious lines that marred it, and in the narrowed murderous eyes.

HERE stood the real Al Brant, the planner of the mail train robbery, the boss of the outlaw bunch that staged it, the false friend who had betrayed an old friend, Dugan Miller, by throwing the guilt on him and letting him go to prison to die of shame and pain.

Al Brant would never let himself and Sally leave this office alive now. Already he and Stubby were gathering themselves to go for their guns. Clay didn't wait.

With his left hand he threw Sally away from him out of the line of fire, while his right hand dipped to the holster on his thigh, jerked out the gun, and thumbed the hammer. He chose the stubby little man, figuring that he was the deadlier of the two.

The choice nearly cost Clay his life, for the slug from Al Brant's derringer

(Continued on page 118)

PLUMB-LOCO CURE

By

JOE McCOY

Illustrated by Joseph Sokoli

DOC COLE'S gaze took in the drab, one-saloon town of Juniper. His deep-black eyes were unfathomable. He stood between smoky kerosene torches under a flamboyant banner. His weight bent the wagon platform. The bold red-lettered words on the wagon's banner proclaimed:

DOCTOR COLE (DESCENDANT OF CHIEF BLACK EAGLE)
THE BENEFACTOR OF ANY AND ALL HUMANKIND!

PURVEYOR OF THAT BOON FOR THE HUMAN FAMILY HANDED

There were some gun-toting hombres who didn't quite believe that this medicine-show doc's snake oil was the cure-all he claimed it was—and none of 'em knew what this suspicion would make happen!

Snorky said suddenly: "Doc! Doc, our biggest diamondback has been tooken out o' the box!"

DOWN BY DOCTOR COLE'S ILLUSTRIOUS GREAT-GRANDFATHER, CHIEF BLACK EAGLE.

DOC COLE'S SNAKE OIL FOR ALL HUMAN MISERIES

Doc Cole twisted his waxed black mustache. He stroked his pointed goatee. His long, black hair covered the shoulders of his fringed, white buckskin.

"It is misfortune, gents and—lady!"

The lone lady looked like a snaggle-toothed she-wolf. She chewed at a snuff stick and stood close up to the platform at the end of the covered Conestoga wagon.

"Gents and lady!" repeated King Cole. "It is most misfortunate that I appear here tonight with my heart bowed down with tragedy."

Doc Cole's foot gently kicked a big, square, canvas-covered box beside him on the platform. A hissing and a sibilant, angry buzzing arose on the alkali laden night of bedraggled Juniper.

Drunken cowhands and clay-daubed miners, in for Saturday night, grinned as the she-wolf lady jumped and dropped her snuff stick. The lady picked up the snuff stick and struck it back into her sagging cheek, street dust and all.

"Shet up, yuh buzzards!" said the lady vehemently. "The doc's tellin' yuh his gizzard's bowed down with—with—"

The small crowd roared good-naturedly. Doc Cole inclined his head in the direction of the appreciative she-wolf lady.

"As I was saying, I come to your fair and prosperous city—"

DOC COLE gazed sadly at the nighest warped building front and the rain-melted 'dobe shacks. A drunken puncher hissed in imitation of the snakes in the box. Doc Cole hastened on.

"But sad to relate, the amazing and stupendous entertainment always provided free, when my daring, unpizenable tamer of the world's most venomous snakes collected in one place, permits these rattles and copperheads, these sidewinders and gila monsters to twine themselves about his bare body, him being complete and wholly immune from the vicious fangs that rend his flesh again and again—"

"Git to the p'int, doc!" yelled a red-faced miner.

"That I will—that I will," Doc Cole hastened to say. "Owing to the sad and sudden demise of my late assistant, over at Buzzard Gap, our last showing, I am

without a snake-tamer. Therefore—"

"What happened to the skunk, doc?" demanded the miner.

Doc Cole bowed his head until the long hair flowed forward.

"My late and lamented snake-tamer had plumb forgotten to take his usual dose of Doc Cole's Snake Oil, which made him immune against all human ills, including snake pizen," said Doc Cole sadly. "And then—"

Doc Cole's goatee twitched. His voice shook.

"And then old Moccassin, his special pet rattler nipped him on the ear," he said mournfully. "So *Lahee*, of the Comanches, the greatest of all snake-tamers died there in horrible convulsions."

The she-wolf lady dropped her snuff stick again, and picked it up. Doc Cole paused a moment, impressively. A drunken desert rat sobbed out loud.

Doc Cole's voice became hopeful.

"But perhaps, gents—and lady! I say perhaps only! There may be one amongst you who would be unafraid—one who would share with me in the distribution of the greatest boon ever given humankind, Doc Cole's Snake Oil—who would, in a word, uncover this box and earn himself one hundred dollars—one hundred silver dollars for just uncovering the snakes and picking them up with a forked stick—anyone—"

"Hey, doc, that's me!" The voice was shrill. "I ain't never been afeered o' ary livin', pizen varmint what creeps, walks, or flies!"

What looked like a piece of dried jerky shaped like a half pint of human was astride a mothy, old white mule. He heeled the mule up to the platform.

"No, oh no, whoever you are!" refused Doc Cole. "Why, little feller, them snakes is full of the venom which I extract daily to mix into Doc Cole's Snake Oil that cures all miseries to which flesh is heir to! Ride on, little feller!"

The dried up hundred pounds of jerky on the mule bristled. His little mouth opened in his yellow face and spat out defiance.

"Me afeered o' ary snake!" His thin voice hooted. "I been chawed on by chiggers and sidewinders, by mosquiters an' copperheads, by gila monsters an' giant ants, by pizen lizards an' armerdillers! An'—"

"Armadillos, little feller?" said Doc Cole. "They are ant-eaters, my good friend."

"Ain't I knowin' that, mister?" squawked the little man. "They is ant-eates, them armerdillers. But they mistooken me fer one o' the ants in the blasted desert from which I jest rid in, them ants is so big. They all chawed onto me, Snorky Snurl, an' look at me! Hain't I still livin' an' breathin'?"

"I misdoubt it," contributed the she-wolf lady, dropping her snuff stick again.

"Snorky Snurl, if that's your monicker, you win the chance to demonstrate before these good folks!" announced Doc Cole. "You will uncover the den of the most venomous reptiles known to man. If you are as good as you say, you get your hundred and a steady chore.

"But first, drink deeply of the Doc Cole Snake Oil that will make you impervious and immune to them deadliest of all pizen, reptilian critters."

Some of the crowd hooted. But more were breathlessly quiet. The wisp of jerky calling himself Snorky Snurl climbed onto the platform.

TEN MINUTES later, Snorky Snurl stood enveloped in writhing folds of diamond-backs and copperheads. His yellowed face wore a beatific smile of confidence.

Doc Cole was dispensing dollar-a-bottle snake oil, as he said, to eager hands.

"The venom of the snake has the property to kill or cure," was Doc Cole's smooth recitation. "It will relieve all of your miseries when you rub it on your rheumatiz. It will cure the whisky shakes in less time than it would take you to procure another bottle of redeye.

"Snake pizen never has had its rightful place. One bottle of Doc Cole's Snake Oil and you're a new hombre. Two bottles and you'll go out and bite the snake."

"You claimin', Doc Cole, that snake pizen can be used to cure any an' all afflictions o' the human body?" came a rasping voice from the crowd.

Doc Cole stroked his waxed mustaches, his eyes searching for the speaker.

"With the formula handed down by my great-grandfather, Chief Black Eagle, I can cure any of the ordinary ills of man," asserted Doc Cole. "Given the proper preparation, like this little—this Snorky Snurl—and the bite of the worst rattler would be of the greatest benefit. Let them see how it works, Snorky Snurl, if you're not afraid. You have already earned your hundred smackers. The snake oil has even ended all of your fear, hasn't it, Snorky Snurl?"

"Never had nary fear!" piped up the little, yellow-faced man. "I been chawed on by every known pizen varmint."

Snorky Snurl twisted a big diamondback on his arm. The snake gave an angry buzz of his tail. Its head darted. Its fangs went into Snorky Snurl's tough forearm.

Snorky Snurl stood there and grinned through snaggle teeth. The she-wolf lady squawked and dropped her snuff stick.

A tall rancher in chaps was striding through the crowd. He held a worn revolver loosely in his right hand. He came to the platform and climbed the steps.

Doc Cole glanced at Snorky Snurl. The little man with the snakes grunted, "Durnit, doc! We went too fer!"

Doc Cole saw beady eyes siding a nose that was carved and turned like an eagle beak. The man had a slitted mouth and his words slid out with emphasis.

"I've been hearin' a lot about the cures of your snake ile, Doc Cole," the man said. "I'm Hank Burton. It's been widely circulated that yuh know about lots of cures. It's reputed your snake pizen really works. I'm hirin' yuh and your snakes for thirty days, an' I'm payin' handsome for the same. Yuh save my brother's life, an' yuh git double five hundred dollars. Yuh try, an' it don't work, yuh git half."

"But, my friend," remonstrated Doc Cole. "The remarkable curative properties of Doc Cole's Snake Oil was never intended to be applied by me personally."

"Nope," said Snorky Snurl, his longtime assistant, under his breath. "Doc ain't never tooken no chance on bein' about after the customers finds out the alky in the snake ile is about the same as in a bottle o' redeye, or maybe some less."

Doc Cole's dead black eyes were deeply speculative.

"Your brother, Mr. Burton? He is suffering from the pangs of climatic rheumatism perhaps?"

"My brother John is sufferin' nary pang," growled Hank Burton, his revolver dangling loosely, but suggestively. "He's jest playin dyin' by inches, an' he's too dang stubborn to have ary doctor hereabouts. The old coot said hisself though that he'd heered o' Doc Cole's famous snake ile, and he wanted me to git some o' the same."

"Sure, sure, I'll sell you a quantity of the greatest boon ever given mankind, an' mark down the price, Mr. Burton—"

"Git in the back, Doc Cole," interrupted Hank Burton. "You and this half pint o' dried rawhide callin' hisself Snorky. Seed you an' him put on the same act over at Buzzard's Gap. He kin handle them pizen critters, so's we'll need him along."

DOC COLE was equal to the occasion. He turned to the crowd.

"Folks, my powers to cure human ills have been given a special call," he announced unctuously. "Mr. Hank Burton opines that the marvelous remedy discovered by Chief Black Eagle, my great-grandsire, may save the life of his beloved brother, John Burton."

Snorky Snurl muttered for Doc Cole's ear alone.

"We ain't ernough alky left fer moren't a dozen bottles o'snake ile. How yuh figgerin' we come out, Doc?"

"Git yore wagon hitched an' movin', Doc Cole," said Hank Burton, in back of the flamboyant banner a minute later. "I'm ridin' herd on yuh out to the Bar-

B-Bar ranch. If'n as yuh say yore snake ile will cure my brother, I'll make it a clean thousan' in dinero."

Then, to Doc Cole's amazement, Hank Burton was out front, haranguing the crowd.

"Tell yuh folks, Doc Cole's claimin' a pizen snake bite is a cure fer humanity when properly handled by him!" proclaimed Hank Burton. "Yuh know my brother, John! He's on his last legs, an' contrarier than a mule! He's believing in Doc Cole's Snake Ile! I'm payin' Doc Cole big to cure him!"

Snorky Snurl crouched beside the snake den back of the high wagon seat. Doc Cole was driving ten minutes later. Hank Burton rode a huge, black horse close to the wagon team.

"Doc, yuh know dang well they ain't a mite o' pizen in any o' our snakes," said Snorky plaintively. "Jest plain red-eye alky an' kerosene may taste a heap like snake ile might, if yuh had any snake ile, but it ain't gonna cure that John Burton. I smell a skunk some'ere."

Doc Cole nodded solemnly.

"We ain't hankering for miracles, Snorky. But Hank Burton remarked his brother is on his last legs. Plainly we can do nothing. But Hank Burton will pay half of five hundred smackers. That isn't to be sneezed at, my little friend, in these times of drouth."

"I ain't likin' ary part o' it, doc," insisted Snorky. "S'pose this John Burton dies."

"That is exactly the reason we are going to the Bar-B-Bar ranch, Snorky," said Doc Cole. "Hank Burton's brother is a sick man, he says. Also he is a contrary coot. Besides snake oil, I have learned some simple, curative remedies. Anyway, Snorky, if John Burton really believes snake oil will help him, what have we to lose?

"Whatever a man believes, so he will be. Faith cures more ills than medicines. And, Snorky, there is the possible thousand in profit."

After which sententious utterance, Doc Cole watched the lights of a valley ranch string into view. He first noticed half a dozen hard mouthed cowhands loafing about, as Hank Burton yelled for one of his men to come and put up Doc Cole's team.

JOHN BURTON was a gaunted, hollow-eyed man. He lay in a big four-poster bed. His blue eyes were dulled, almost filmed.

"Doc Cole? Yes— Henry— Doc Cole."

John Burton murmured weakly when Hank Burton stood beside him and introduced Doc Cole.

"Yuh recollect, John," said Hank Burton. "Five years ago yuh bought some o' Doc Cole's snake ile. Yuh claimed it done yuh a heap o' good. An' I heered Doc Cole hisself was in Juniper. He's stayin' by to try an' stop yore misery, John."

"Yeah—Doc Cole—snake ile? Whatever yuh say—"

John Burton's eyes closed wearily. Doc Cole was tense, on edge. He had seen that John Burton's words had been mechanical. The sick man had failed to understand. He could but repeat what he had heard.

Doc Cole felt John Burton's pulse. He did not show his surprise. The sick man's pulse was rapid, and it was strong. He had expected it might be weak.

On guard, Doc Cole said, "Yes, I see, Mr. Burton. Your brother is suffering from insufficient nutrition. To some that would mean lack of food. I'll explain. He may have plenty of food, but some element interferes with his digestion. I will prepare my famous snake oil remedy, with some liquid of herbs, and we will see what happens."

Hank Burton looked down his sharp nose at his brother. He spoke loudly, and suddenly

"Yuh said, Doc Cole, that pizen snake bite, properly applied is good fer any sickness!"

Doc Cole's head did not move. Only his black eyes took in the fluttering window curtain. He saw the hard faces of two of Hank Burton's hands. They were eavesdropping at the window.

"I have always told the customers that,

Mr. Burton," said Doc Cole quietly. "It is a part of my business. In your brother's case—"

Hank Burton interrupted.

"I'm leavin' John in yore hands, Doc Cole!" he announced, again with more force than necessary. "I'm pinnin' faith in yuh, an' I'm payin' for the kind o' snake ile that will cure!"

Whereupon Hank Burton turned and strode heavily from the room.

Doc Cole went to the open window. There was now no one outside. He returned and again took John Burton's pulse. It was good, but too fast.

Doc Cole looked about the room. He failed to find anything like a heart stimulant. He wondered if there could possibly be strychnine in the ranch house.

The oil lamp was turned low in the sick man's room. Doc Cole went out quietly.

Little Snorky was waiting at the corner of the ranch house. The yellow-faced man was edgy and scared.

"Lookee, doc," he pleaded. "Them rannies has been spyin' onto you an' me, an' they don't mean us ary good. Whassay we hitch up an' high-tail out'n here. Yuh don't think yuh kin cure that John Burton, do yuh? Snake oil ain't—"

"We will retire to our wagon, and I will prepare a concoction of bitter herbs, Snorky," stated Doc Cole, thinking fast. "While I am cooking this medicine, you get your mule out quietly and ride back into Juniper, You find the sheriff and a regular doctor, if there is one, and fetch them out pronto."

"Now yuh're gittin' some sense, doc," agreed Snorky, and went around the old Conestoga.

Snorky climbed in the back, while Doc Cole was producing some simple stomach remedies from under the wagon seat.

Snorky cried out suddenly, poking his face through the canvas.

"Doc, Doc, our biggest diamond-back has been tooken out o' the box!"

"Sure the snake did not escape through a break, Snorky?"

A warning hiss came from the rattler's mouth.

"They ain't ary hole, an' the canvas was back where the rattler was hooked out'n the den, doc."

"Slip out and get to your mule, Snorky," said Doc Cole quickly. "If you get away, bring the sheriff, as I said."

"But, doc, what in time yuh meanin' to do?"

"Hunt a snake," said Doc Cole tersely, hauling a snubnosed .38 from under the wagon seat. "It is well that we have been deceiving the public for the good of humankind. Those who believe our reptiles are pizenous will be surprised."

DOC COLE was tall and bulky. But he managed to keep to the shadows along the ranch house. He held his .38 tucked in his pocket. There was no one in the wide hallway of the house.

The dim oil lamp gave a feeble light from John Burton's sickroom. Doc Cole chuckled to himself.

"Mighty pretty—mighty pretty," he murmured. "But if they wait for that harmless old diamond-back to finish a murder, John Burton will be here when the last trump is called."

Doc Cole halted beside the door of the sickroom. He still saw no one. John Burton lay quiet. His gaunted face was pallid, but the bedspread moved slightly with his breathing.

Doc Cole gave a sharp glance around. Evidently the snake had not yet been brought to the sick man's room. Doc Cole stepped cautiously inside.

The walls seemed to crash down upon his head.

THE oil lamp still burned low. Doc Cole had a burry taste in his mouth. He was lying on the floor. For seconds he imagined he had been struck down and partly paralyzed.

But his helplessness was brought about by the expert tying of a lariat through his arms behind his back. The rope was drawn down, enwrapping his legs tightly.

Lying on his back, Doc Cole was looking up at the four-poster bed on which John Burton was lying. His head ached. But his keen ears told him John Burton still breathed.

A hard voice spoke over by the open window.

"I'm hopin' yuh didn't crack his skull, Buller," said the voice of Hank Burton. "After the snake finishes the job, we're wantin' Doc Cole alive an' kickin'. Yuh heered him send that Snorky to town to git the sheriff. Danged if'n that wa'ant playin' right inter our hands."

"Yup," said the hired hand called Buller. "We make out as if'n we jest grabbed the snake doctor an' tied him up after the snake pizened yore brother. Ev'body in Juniper knows Doc Cole allus claimed a snake bite could cure as well as kill a man."

"A'right, Buller, hoist that sidewinder in easy like," came Hank Burton's voice. "The snake's kind o' knocked out, but he'll wake up. There yuh are. Now shove the pole out an' push him off alongside John's head."

Doc Cole scarcely believed what he saw. He had heard of cold-blooded murders. . . . He had seen some violence in his time. But this intended killing surpassed anything in fratricidal ruthlessness he had ever encountered.

A long, stiff pole came slowly through the open window. The end had been split to enclose the middle of a huge four-foot rattlesnake. Doc Cole felt sick inside.

True, for the moment, the big snake was apparently stunned. Its body writhed slightly, but not enough for the rattler to try to free itself. It was too lifeless to either buzz or hiss. Its red mouth hung inertly downward.

Doc Cole was thinking of the diamondback missing from his own den. The snake looked as if it had been frozen. This was confirmed.

"Maybe so, Buller, yuh held the snake in that cold spring too dang' long," said Hank Burton. "It looks 'most dead to me."

"It ain't," said a hard voice. "Done the trick before. Soon as the sidewinder gits warmed up by yore brother's face, it'll wake up. An' it'll strike at the nighest thing that moves. There yuh are, Hank. Right down by John's head, agin, his ear. I'll loosen it."

Doc Cole saw the pole shake. The big snake dropped loose. Doc Cole had but one thought then. The rattler stolen from his wagon had no venom. It would strike quickly enough when aroused to life.

But its fangs could not kill.

Then, Doc Cole thought, what would happen when Hank Burton discovered the snake was harmless? Doc Cole went to work on the lariat around his arms.

Having gone that far toward murder, and framing him for it, Doc Cole was convinced that Hank Burton would not leave his brother John alive. He heard Hank Burton talking.

"C'mon, Buller. We'll be ridin' up toward Juniper, leavin' things as they be. Reckon it'll be best fer us to be seen a right smart piece away when it happens. 'Course John will be dead some spell, an' we say that was how it was when we got back. We aim to git back jest ahead o' the sheriff what Doc Cole so luckily summoned."

"Yeah-yeah—Hank!" said Buller. "I'll have one look at Doc Cole, to see that he's peaceable an' safe."

DOC COLE was lying inert, his eyes closed. He heard steps at the sickroom door. Evidently Buller looked him over and was satisfied. The hired killer who had held a snake in a cold spring and then put him in the sick man's bed grunted and went away.

Doc Cole waited until he heard horses moving out of the ranch yard. He came

to energetic life. It was impossible to see to the top of the bed.

"Even if that snake ain't pizenous, the shock o' the bite might be fatal to John Burton," muttered Doc Cole. "Can't let even a harmless rattler bite him. No, sir."

He tried to lift himself at the side of the bed, and partly sat up. His arms were rigid behind him. His muscles reacted queerly when he saw the big rattler was beginning to writhe, coming to life.

"If they come back with the sheriff, and John Burton hasn't even been bitten, then I've got Hank Burton nailed," said Doc Cole. "But if John Burton's bitten, even though the snake ain't pizen, they'll hang me first and talk about it afterward."

Doc Cole was sweating. But the beads on his forehead were cold. For suddenly the four feet of half frozen rattlesnake was begining to draw up. The heat of John Burton's face and body was warming the reptile back to life.

Doc Cole noted, absently, that the snake had eleven buttons on its tail. It was an old one, as rattlers go.

Doc Cole fought the rope harder when John Burton suddenly moaned and moved. One of the sick man's hands was flung out. The arm fell directly across the big snake.

Doc Cole fell over on his side. He fought his way to a sitting position. And he saw the snake's buttoned tail dangling several inches over the side of the bed.

The tail was beginning to draw up. In another minute or so, the snake's fangs would likely find the sick man's face or throat. The shock might be too much for a man who was, without doubt, suffering from some inner poisoning.

Doc Cole saw but one thing he could do. He did that.

Diving forward, Doc Cole struck the side of the bed with his chin. But his white teeth closed upon the rattlesnake's body just above the buttons.

Overcoming his queeziness, Doc Cole went over backward, his teeth still firmly fastened in the rattler's squirming body above the tail. The four feet of rubbery snake struck the floor.

The rattler was alive enough to begin coiling. A warning hiss came from its ugly red mouth. Desperately, Doc Cole rolled all of his weight upon the snake before it could revive further.

Instinctively Doc Cole held on with his teeth until the snake was several feet from the bed. He realized the snake had come more alive. Enough so for it to strike feebly as it doubled back.

The slimy folds went across his face, and Doc Cole rolled his head down upon the reviving snake. This time he clamped his teeth hard into the slippery, scaly body, just behind its triangular head.

The rattler writhed and lay still.

Doc Cole was grimly satisfied. He chuckled inside as he tried to get the taste of live snake hide out of his mouth.

"Years and years I've been selling supposed snake oil, and for the first time I have to bite a snake," he said whimsically. "But I'll have to play dead until Hank Burton completes his neat murder frame."

Doc Cole listened. He could not hear John Burton breathing. He wished he could find out about that. If John Burton had been partly poisoned by strychnine, or some other stimulant, his overtaxed heart might have quit.

BUT Doc Cole was still bound and John Burton had not moved half an hour later. Heavy boots tramped into the hallway.

"Tell yuh, sheriff, it was luck we met up with yuh!" boomed the voice of Hank Burton. "When I fetched this Doc Cole to try an' help my brother, I had no mind he'd really try one of his livin'. pizen snakes, like he was allus braggin' he could do. But there was John—and there was the snake—an' we had to knock Doc Cole out an' tie him up!"

Doc Cole heard the thin voice of Snorky.

"It ain't so, sheriff. Doc never done sich. One of our snakes what hain't got ary pizen left was tooken out'n the box.

(Continued on page 119)

BULLET BUCKAROO

By EMERSON BLACKWELL

RANNY McARTHUR dropped a big brown hand to the butt of his black-handled, blue-steel Colt and leaned forward to watch the skulker there in the darkness.

Right in front of Ranny was a log cabin. Light shone from the windows and blue smoke curled from the chimney. It was a strange place to the cowboy. But the actions of the slinking hombre, whom he could see moving toward the cabin, told him that something was wrong.

For a moment the prowler stood partially revealed in the faint light that fell through the window. And in that instant Ranny glimpsed a swarthy, evil face and saw the black gun that was gripped in a grimy paw.

"Now, what in hell can *he* be up to?" wondered Ranny. "I don't want nothin' to happen to the folks who live in this place—leastwise, not until I've had a chance to buy me some grub off 'em, she-wolf hungry as I am, and this bein' the first sign of civilization I've seen in two days."

Schooled in gunfighting, bullet-scarred from many a ruckus, Ranny was too chuck-full of gun savvy to bust up to a strange place without investigating.

He had left his bronc among some trees and had come silently forward on foot to have a look at the outfit before hailing the house. It was then that he had seen that flat-faced, slit-eyed halfbreed snaking round the house.

Suddenly the skulker spoke to someone who was hidden from Ranny among the pine trees.

"Don' move, *señor*," he said, "or I keel you."

There was a moment of silence during which Ranny swiftly debated what he should do. His first impulse was to leap forward and tear into the prowling hombre. But he checked the movement as he realized that he didn't know what this was all about.

Ranny advanced silently, too gun-wise to bust in without investigating.

He heard a startled gasp. And then a cracked and senile voice blurted out a name.

"You! Scar Vargas! Don't kill me! I'll give it up! Don't shoot me!"

"Han' over the box," snarled Scar Vargas. "Come on. Pronto!"

A silvery-haired old man, stooped and feeble, stepped into view and handed the half-breed a package wrapped in leather.

RANNY McARTHUR, crouching there in the darkness, got one glimpse of the gray-beard's lined and haggard face and knew instantly which side he was on.

A chuckle was on his lips as he stepped silently forward and rammed his gun into the back of Scar Vargas.

"Drop the *pistola*," he said sharply.

The steeple-hatted, swarthy-faced man stiffened. His fingers released the leath-

When Ranny McArthur stepped into the middle of a hold-up to rescue that elderly stranger, he expected to get at least a little thanks—and instead got himself a first-class chance at a rocky ride to Boothill!

er-wrapped box, letting it fall to the ground. He uttered a queer, choking sound, then suddenly ducked low and whirled toward Ranny, his gun flaming.

Ranny McArthur had to shoot. The cowboy's Colt was already cocked. He had only to squeeze the trigger. Scar Vargas never got a chance for his life. A big .45 slug, driven into a man's chest, through his left shirt pocket, has a very final and definite effect.

The old man, who had stood aghast at the sudden tragedy, abruptly scooped the box from the ground, darted to the cabin door, opened it, ducked inside and slammed it after him. He did not even wait to utter a word of thanks to the man who had saved him from robbery and perhaps death.

Ranny McArthur whistled softly.

"Waal, I'll be blamed." He chuckled. "Ain't that a funny way for a feller to act. Never even invited me in to have a bite of supper. Mebby the old jasper's kind o' tched in the haid. I just *got* to bum a meal off him."

Without a second glance at the fallen half-breed, Ranny McArthur calmy stepped over the body and knocked on the cabin door. He was a cool customer, was this lean, lanky boomer cowboy in the wide-brimmed Stetson and bullhide chaps.

There was no answer to his knock. Anger welled up within him. Lifting the latch, he pushed the door open, stepped into the room.

FIRST thing he saw was a table set with steaming food. A buxom woman with iron-gray hair was just pouring coffee into a thick cup. The very odor of it made Ranny's mouth water.

The woman looked up, startled at the cowboy's unceremonious entrance. The feeble, gray-haired man, whom Ranny had just rescued, suddenly stepped through the doorway from an inner room and leveled a shotgun at Ranny.

"Git out!" he cried in a quavering voice. "Git, before I shoot!"

"But see here!" protested Ranny McArthur. "I'm your friend. It was me plugged Scar Vargas."

The old man's voice rose to a shrill scream.

"Git out, I say!"

Ranny saw the old man's finger tighten on the trigger of the scattergun and hastily backed through the doorway.

"To blazes with you," he said hotly. "I'm sorry I saved yore life now. I hope you lose yore old box of whatever Scar was after. Yo're the fust Westerner I ever knowed that wouldn't feed a hungry man."

Choking down his wrath, he stomped back to his mustang, untied it from the tree and slid into the saddle.

Ranny did not know Scar. He had never heard of the fellow until the graybeard had blurted out the name. If the cowboy had been a law officer, he would have felt it his duty to search Scar's body for evidence and take it into town. But it had been a number of years since young McArthur had worn a deputy's shield and he didn't want to get mixed up in that work again. He liked the lazy, easy-going life of a boomer buckaroo much better.

For hours, Ranny galloped swiftly along zig-zag trails, until he finally dropped down into a lower valley. Darkness cloaked the rangeland, the ghostly trees, the slow-moving files of cattle that were visible here and there on the plain.

The smell of frying bacon and the delicious odor of coffee was in the air when the rambling range waddy finally drew rein before an old frame ranch house. In the pallid light of early morning, he saw rough-looking cowboys lounging at the door of the kitchen, some washing their faces, others slicking back their

Illustrated by Frank Volp

hair as they waited the call for breakfast.

"Hi yuh, boys," he said as he traipsed toward the cook shack, spurs dragging. "Where's the foreman of this outfit?"

Instead of answering, the cowboys deliberately turned their backs on him. Ranny felt himself flushing to the roots of his hair. Was he to be turned away hungry again? He had always made it a practice to work for the little grub he ate. He had never shirked chores. But evidently this outfit was not even going to give him a chance.

RANNY McARTHUR halted uncertainly in the middle of the yard. Anger at the injustice of the thing seethed within him.

He could not understand this sudden hostility. According to cattle country custom a traveling cowboy was always invited to get his feet in the trough. Now twice in one day Ranny had been refused food. There was something mighty queer about the whole thing.

He heard a drum of hoofs behind him and turned as three riders vaulted from their broncs in the yard. All wore stars on their vests. The cowboy recognized the leader by his big nose and his perpetual scowl. It was Sheriff Jed Purdy. The men with him were deputies.

Spurs clicked on the gravel and leather rigging creaked as they stomped across the yard and into the house.

Ranny's hunger drove him to a desperate move. He fell in step with the sheriff's men and followed them inside. He saw a big-toothed, lantern-jawed hombre shaking hands with Sheriff Purdy and heard someone mutter that it was "Wolf" Rucker, the ranch boss.

Wolf's barrel chest bulged and his piggish brown eyes suddenly blazed with anger as he saw Ranny in the doorway.

"You!" he roared. "Git the blazes out of here! What do yuh mean, buttin' in on my business?"

Ranny turned and started out, but Wolf's bellow stopped him.

"Wait a minute!" roared the ranch boss. "Come back here! I want to have a look at you!"

In spite of Wolf's strange actions and despite his own hunger, Ranny gave the appearance of coolness and unconcern as he walked over to face the cattle boss. In some ways Wolf was the biggest man he had ever seen. It was not so much his height as the thickness of his body and the size of his arms and feet.

"I don't know you," growled Wolf, glaring at the hungry cowboy. "What do yuh want here?"

Ranny McArthur's snapping black eyes were expressionless.

"I'm lookin' fer a job, Mr. Ricker," he said. "I never knowed it was a criminal offense before."

A laugh went up from the sheriff and his men at Ranny's reply. Big-nosed Sheriff Purdy studied the tall, black-haired buckaroo with keener interest. He liked the cool way that Ranny handled himself.

Wolf Rucker drew in his horns.

"Huh," he grunted. "What could you do? Tote wood for the cook or help the jingler kid?"

"Do I *look* like a tramp?" drawled Ranny.

Again the sheriff and his deputies snickered. Wolf Rucker's face reddened with anger. He was getting nowhere fast with this strange puncher.

"I'm bettin' you're no good," he said curtly. "Report to Marty Snell, my segundo, an' he'll prove it. Better have yore breakfast first. I hear the cook ringin' the bell."

THERE was a clatter of boots on the porch, shouts, howls and roughhousing as the cook hammered on a steel triangle. Ranny followed the jostling buckaroos into the kitchen and soon was busy with a plate of bacon and eggs and a steaming cup of coffee. He had to take a sharp hold on himself to keep from wolfing down the food.

As the hot coffee warmed him and the hunger vanished, he had time to reflect upon the strange happenings of the last few hours. He found himself wondering

who the gray-haired folks in the log cabin might be.

How would they explain Scar's death? If they told a story of a strange cowboy busting in to save them, it would require a lot of explanations. It would also probably mean that the sheriff would be looking for Ranny before long if he were not already doing so.

Through the screen door of the kitchen, Ranny saw an Indian boy leap off a saddleless pony and run into the house. He carried something in his arms that looked like a bundle of clothing wrapped in a slicker.

A few minutes later Wolf Rucker appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, followed by three gunmen. In their midst was the bronzed, bare-headed Navajo.

Ranny saw them regarding him with sidelong glances and a sharp feeling of uneasiness swept over him. At the end of the table Wolf stopped and leaned over to speak to a short, horse-faced puncher, Marty Snell, the segundo.

Marty got up, jerked his guns into place and started to follow Wolf outside.

"I want to see yuh, McArthur," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be down by the pump house."

"Yes, sir," answered Ranny. "I'll be right with yuh."

RANNY hoisted a final snort of coffee under his belt, kicked back his chair and walked outside. Alert and suspicious, he let his hand hang close to his guns as he dragged his rattling spurs across the gravelly yard toward the creaking windmill. The unoiled metal wheel shrieked and groaned on its bearings as it spun around swiftly, high up on a fifty-foot tower. A pump house was built around the frame work.

The short, bow-legged segundo, Marty Snell, stood at the entrance to this shed.

"I've got a job fer yuh," he grunted when Ranny stopped before him. "It's a tough proposition. If yuh got any yaller up yore spine, yuh still got a chance to draw out."

Ranny's face did not show his anger, but there was a harsh note in his voice when he answered.

"I got just enough yaller in me to ram my fist down yore throat, grab yore innards an' turn yuh inside out," he barked. "An' I couldn't even git up a sweat doin' it."

With a savage snarl, Marty reached for a gun. Ranny shot out a steel-muscled hand, got a grip on the front of Marty's

"Get out!" cried the oldster quaveringly, levelling the scatter-gun at Ranny.

calfskin vest and shook the segundo until his teeth rattled.

"Turn loose of me," raged the segundo. "Yo're fired. Hit the grit, afore I lose my temper."

Releasing his hold on Marty, Ranny gave him a shove that slammed him back against the side of the pump house.

"All right," he chuckled. "Now that I'm fired an' you ain't my boss no longer go ahead an' snag out them irons."

For a moment it seemed that the bow-legged, horse-faced jasper would go for his hoglegs. But something in Ranny McArthur's eyes stopped him.

"All right," said Marty. "I was only testin' yuh out. You ain't fired. Stick around for further orders. Don't leave the place either, savvy?"

"Shore," answered Ranny. "Now let me tell you somethin'. Never make a pass at me with yore guns unless yuh aim to go through with it."

Rather enviously, Ranny McArthur watched the other men as they cut out their broncs down at the hoss corral, saddled, mounted and galloped away. Marty Snell was among them. Sheriff Purdy and his men continued to hang around the house.

All day long, Ranny was forced to loaf around the 808 ranch house. Along toward sundown the punchers came trooping in. The sheriff and his deputies had gone out and then come back again. Ranny couldn't understand that at all. It made him uneasy.

Night had fallen and it was dark in the yard before Ranny got his first orders.

"Go down to the hoss corral an' git yore bronc, McArthur," commanded the segundo. "Saddle up an' hide the mustang behind the pump house. Be shore nobody sees yuh. Wolf's goin' to give you a chance to make good on yore fightin 'talk."

WOLF RUCKER'S harsh, gruff voice called out to Ranny as he stepped up on the porch of the house. The place was pitch dark. Utter silence hovered over it, broken only by the raucous braying of a burro in a nearby corral.

Rucker's huge, bearlike body loomed enormous in the shadows as he led Ranny along a hallway and into the ranch office. There was no light, but moonbeams, falling through the window, revealed a leather bag resting on a table. The floor was littered with papers and documents. The door of a safe in the corner hung open.

"All right, McArthur," growled Wolf Rucker. "Marty tells me ye're a proddy gent. I'm ready to test out just what kind of a gun-slick you are."

His hand pointed toward a bag on the table.

"I need a man to take that bag into town secret-like an' unseen," he continued. "My enemies are watchin' every move I make. You bein' a stranger won't be suspected. If yo're scairt, yuh kin still draw out."

"I'll go through with it," said Ranny. "Where are these enemies of yores hidden? If yuh know they're here, why don't yuh blast 'em out?"

"I don't know who they are," said Rucker impatiently. "Or where they're hid either. My outfit's honeycombed with traitors. I don't know who to trust. All you got to do is obey orders. See that pump house out there through the window?"

"I ain't blind," answered Ranny.

"All right, if yuh ain't blind tell me what yuh see up there now."

As the sorely puzzled cowboy watched, a faint light appeared through a window high up on the second floor of the pump house. Someone was waving a match back and forth.

"He's the lookout," grunted Rucker. "Soon as everything's clear, he'll flash the light again. It's a signal for you to take this bag, git onto yore bronc an' scoot for town. Don't stop until you've reached the Sagebrush cantina. I'll meet you there."

As Wolf Rucker talked, Ranny tried to read the expression on his flat, lopsided face. Wolf's teeth gleamed in the moonlight. His piggish brown eyes glowed deep in bony sockets.

"I'd like to know more about this," said Ranny slowly. "What's in this bag? Why should anybody be after you?"

"Never mind the questions," snapped Wolf. "I'm payin' you to do as yo're told. This window here is open an' there's a screen on it. When yuh see the signal in the tower, sneak out an' git goin'."

Another question was on Ranny's lips, but Wolf had already vanished into the darkened hallway. A moment later Ranny saw him stomping swiftly toward the bunkhouse in his high-heeled boots.

Suspicion flared in Ranny's mind. Why was the ranch boss going to sleep in the bunkhouse? Was he trying to get in the clear before something happened? Somehow Wolf's story did not ring true.

SLIPPING over to the table, Ranny felt around until he touched the catches of the leather bag. It was locked. Whipping out his knife, he pried it open and then held it up to the moonlight. Gold and silver pieces tinkled as he upended the bag.

"Gosh," he muttered. "Funny Wolf would trust me, a stranger, with so much dinero."

His suspicions grew to a certainty. The truth was gradually dawning on him. The looted safe and the torn-up condition of the room could mean but one thing, thievery, robbery. Only this time it was not the real thing but a fake.

If he waited for that signal and stepped out of the window, a blast of lead would mow him down. The sheriff, who had been kept here on purpose, would rush up, find the bag on him, see the ransacked room and would acquit Wolf of the killing on the grounds that it was a robbery.

"Why do they want to git me?" mused Ranny.

His thoughts flashed to the Indian boy who had brought in the bundle and he began a swift search of the room. It was some time before he found what he sought. Scar Vargas' crimson-stained clothes. That meant that Wolf Rucker was Scar's boss, that he had sent Vargas to rob the old couple.

Somehow they had learned that Ranny had killed the half-breed and they were going to dispose of him as quickly as possible. He might know too much.

The realization galvanized Ranny into action.

"I can't wait for the signal now," he muttered. "I've got to git out of here pronto, before they're set to finish me."

Picking up the bag, he gripped a six-gun in one hand and slipped noiselessly toward the hall door. He could hear heavy breathing and then a whisper. Ambushers were waiting out there.

Darting over to the open window, he looked and listened. All was quiet. There was no sign of a light in the pump house tower.

Ranny lowered the leather bag outside, slid one leg over the window sill, followed it with the other and then dropped down into the shrubbery that bordered the house.

Hugging the wall, he kept in the shadows until he reached the end of the building. Now an open space of a hundred feet lay between Ranny and the brush where he had hidden his horse.

He thought of trying to creep across that spot, but realized he would be seen. Instead he darted across it at a dead run.

Br-r-r-rang! The night stillness was shattered by the crack of a rifle. A spurt of flame leaped from the second story window of the pump house.

A dozen guns were firing on him now. Bullets whistled past his head. A slug churned up the turf not an inch from his toe.

Down at the bunkhouse men came pouring out, shouting excitedly and waving their guns. Wolf Rucker was bellowing at them.

Inside the main building sounded the high-pitched voice of Sheriff Jed Purdy.

The branches of palo verde trees hung like drooping willows in Ranny's path. He dropped the heavy bag and leaped for this cover. A gun flamed in his face. He fired at the flash and heard a body thud to the ground.

Ranny stifled a cry himself as a searing hot iron ripped the flesh along his ribs.

Through the whip-like stems of the trees, he caught a glimpse of his snorting, rearing mustang and he breathed a prayer of relief. At least they hadn't found his horse.

Ranny heard a snarling oath and saw a shadowy figure leap toward him. It was Marty Snell. Marty's guns blazed almost in his face. Ranny hardly realized that his own Colts were blazing death at the segundo until he saw Marty stumble and fall.

Ranney reached the roan, jerked loose the tie rope and vaulted into the saddle. Bending low he spurred his mustang out of the palo verde grove and out into the broken prairie.

TWO hours later Ranny drew rein in a patch of high weeds behind an old broken-down wagon and studied the familiar outline of a slate-roofed log cabin. This was the spot where he had shot down Scar Vargas.

Through the windows he could see the old folks moving back and forth. They were acting as if nothing had happened.

"I reckon Wolf ain't raided 'em yet," muttered Ranny. "But if my guess is correct he will. He wanted to git shet of me an' the sheriff fust, then he'll be out to git that box that Scar was about to steal when I plugged him."

Ranny tied his horse in a thicket, loosened the saddle girth, and moved stealthily toward the cabin. He was sure that Wolf Rucker and his men had not gotten here yet, but he was not taking any chances. They might be lying in ambush, watching the place.

Ranny did not knock at the door of the cabin this time. He simply opened it and walked in, gun in hand. The old folks were sitting at a table. Both jumped up, the woman with a startled scream.

The silvery-haired old man darted a hand out toward a gun which lay on the table, but Ranny covered him before the old man could reach it.

"No more funny business now, Grandpop," he growled. "I don't want to have to hurt yuh. Pull them blinds down. All of 'em."

The old man faced Ranny defiantly, but the old woman hastened to obey.

"Who are you?" blurted the graybeard. "What you you want?"

Ranny McArthur put on his fiercest look.

"I want that box you took away from Scar Vargas," he snapped. "You better git it for me, old lady, unless you want to become a widder pronto."

Tears were in the old lady's eyes, but she obeyed Ranny and brought the leather-bound box over to the table in front of him.

Quickly Ranny unwrapped the box and opened it up. The first thing that met his eyes was a WANTED notice, sent out by a Texas sheriff. The picture on the reward circular was of a huge, barrel-chested man, lantern-jawed and buck-toothed. Wolf Rucker! The name given was not Rucker. It was Verne Sherick.

Written in blood across the face of the paper were the words, "Get him."

Ranny did not bother about looking through the other papers in the box. Instead he turned to the frightened old people and quickly told them who he was. He knew that their names were Tom and Ella Worth from the documents he had seen in the box.

"We've got to git together here," he said smiling into their frightened faces, "because we're all in the same boat."

"What do yuh mean?" asked Tom Worth.

"Do you know a man named Rucker?" countered Ranny.

"Why, yes," exclaimed Mrs. Worth. "What have you got to do with him? We paid him every cent we owe on that mortgage."

"Well, I don't know anything about a mortgage," said Ranny. "But I'm here to tell yuh that Wolf Rucker is gunning for you. It was him sent Scar Vargas here to rob you."

"That's a lie!" cried Tom Worth. "Don't believe a word this rascal says, Ma. He's workin' some slick scheme. You an' me both know that Joe Rucker is dead. It was him sent us this box with all our deeds an' papers except the cancelled mortgage in it. I never could understand why he sent us that reward notice for Verne Sherick, but we kept it anyhow."

RANNY McARTHUR'S thoughts were working swiftly now. He was beginning to understand what it was all about. It was perfectly evident why Wolf Rucker wanted that box. As long as the Worths had that reward notice, there was always the danger that they might identify Rucker as Sherick, the notorious outlaw.

"Let's git this straight," said Ranny slowly. "Tell me again about this Jo-

seph Rucker. Who was he? What did he have to do with this mortgage? What did he look like?"

"He was a little gray, baldheaded feller," said Tom Worth. "A friend of ours, an El Paso money lender. He let us have ten thousand dollars on a mortgage on this place. The house ain't much but there's a lot of acreage. Little by little we paid him back. Just about the time we sent him the last installment, we got word that Mr. Rucker had died. One of his last acts was to send us this box. Mebby he was tryin' to warn us against this outlaw, Verne Sherick, or send us a message of some kind by puttin' that WANTED poster in. The funny part is that he never returned the mortgage cancelled. Now we hear that somebody's got hold of it an' is goin' to foreclose."

"That's the answer," exulted Ranny. "Verne Sherick, the outlaw, robbed Joe Rucker, stole the mortgage an' tuk Rucker's name. Now he's goin' to try to grab yore ranch. Somehow he found out that you had that WANTED circular in the box an' he sent Scar Vargas here to git it. If I'm not mistaken he'll be here himself afore the night's over."

As if Ranny McArthur's works were a prophesy, Mrs. Worth's shrill shriek caused him to whirl around just in time to see Wolf Rucker throwing down on him from the back door. Suddenly Ranny found himself lying flat on the floor.

For a moment he experienced utter surprise. He did not even feel the bullet that had floored him. It was only a split second before his senses began to return, but it seemed ages. In that space of time, Wolf Rucker leaped toward him.

Ranny tried to move his right arm, but a dead weight seemed to hold it down. His left reached for a gun, lifted it and fired. Wolf Rucker fell across the table top, his life blood staining the WANTED circular which had helped to bring him to justice.

Ranny half expected to see more gunmen come charging in, but none came. Evidently Wolf did not take all his men into his confidence. The fight was over. Ranny crawled over to the bed where he fell heavily.

Tom and Ella Worth bent over him anxiously. The old man ripped his shirt away from the shoulder wound. Ma came running with hot water.

"It drilled clean through," said Tom Worth. "I'll have yuh out of bed in no time. In the meantime Ma an' me will kind of enjoy yore company."

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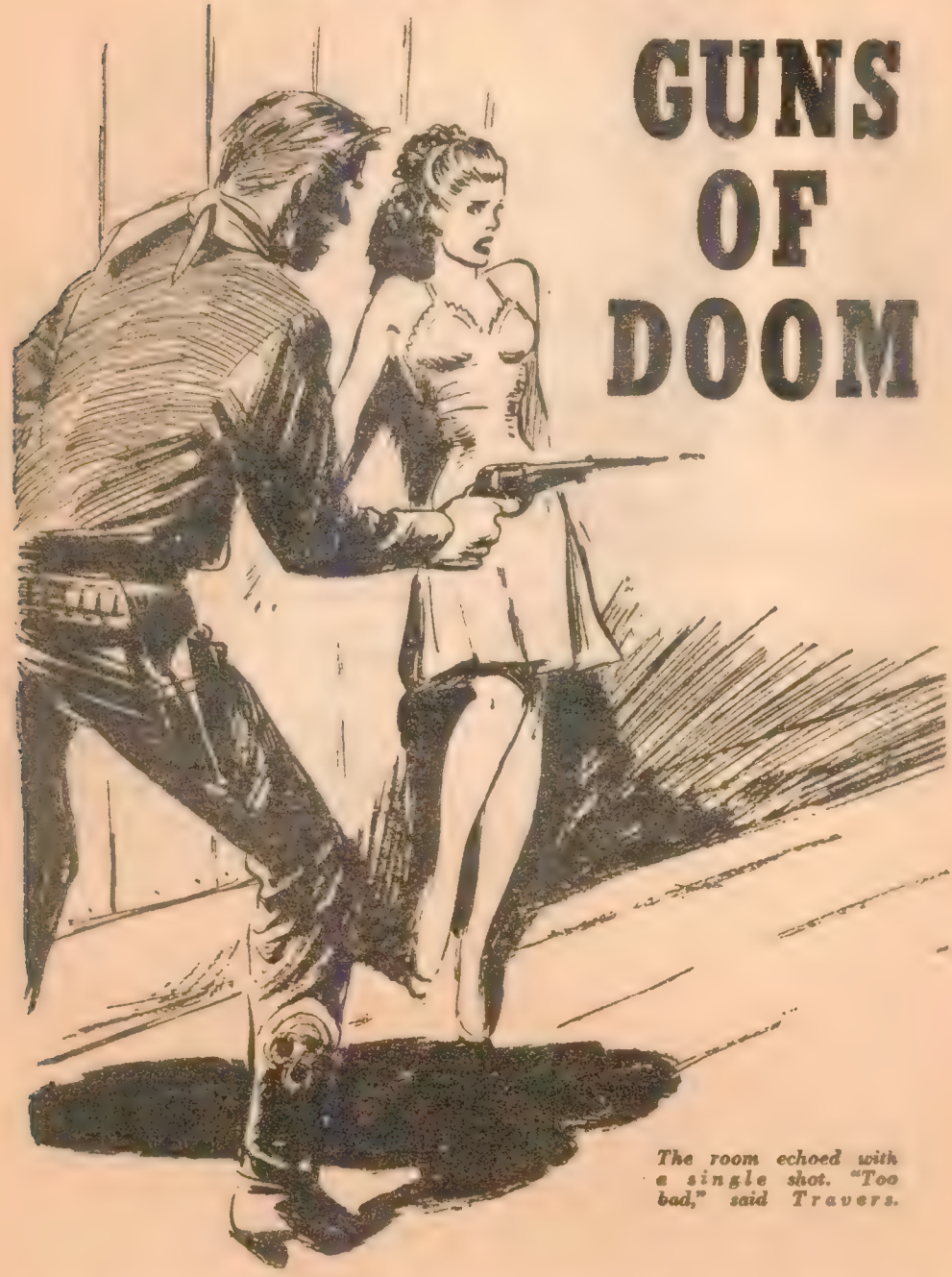
GUNS OF DOOM



The room echoed with a single shot. "Too bad," said Travers.

It was pretty evident to Slim Travers that this Nine-O Ranch was being rodded by a passel of dry-gulching two-legged coyotes who had some sinister plan under their outward actions, which were bad enough in themselves—but what chance did he have to beat 'em?

Illustrated by Jay McArdle

SLIM TRAVERS looked down at the fever-bright cheeks and the dull, listless eyes of the tousle-haired younker in the four-poster bed. He glanced quickly at Millie Anson, who stood across from him. Millie's brown eyes were full of worry. She held a cautioning finger to her curved red lips.

It came to the tall, bronzed waddy with a shock that the younker in the bed was in a bad way. Millie was warning him to be careful of what he said. Travers forced a grin for the benefit of the small boy. He had just returned after four days of chasing stray broncs scattered in the snowy badlands.

"Hiya, what's all this, Pard?" he said heartily to the younker. "Us tough hombres ain't supposed to hole up for winter 'fore Christmas time."

Little Jimmy Anson tried to match Travers' grin. It was a weak, sick effort. He looked upon Travers as his pard who had taught him to walk when he was a toddler. His grin faded on a racking cough.

"He's caught a bad cold, Slim," said Millie softly. "But he'll be ready to break in a new pony come Christmas."

"Yeah," gulped the younker, fighting for breath. "Uncle Jake said it was just a cold—"

Another spasm of coughing shook him. Travers continued to grin with his teeth set. He could see that Jimmy was beyond the stage of any ordinary cold.

He said, cheerfully, "Doc Jones will rope and hogtie that cough for you, Jimmy, as soon as he makes it out here from town."

Jimmy caught his breath to say, "But Uncle Jake says I don't need a doctor."

Travers' gray eyes went as hard as bits of steel and he started to exclaim, "Don't need—!" But Millie's eyes warned him and he cut it short. He added, "Sure, Jimmy, your Uncle Jake's right. You stay in bed an' do as Millie tells you."

"I always mind sis," said the boy. "I ought-a be helpin' her since she hurt her ankle."

Millie smiled at Travers. "It's nothing, Slim, but a sprain," she said quickly. "It's kept me in, though. I . . . I missed you, but everything's all right."

TRAVERS' heart pounded a little harder. Millie couldn't have missed him the way he had her. Not that he had ever said much. He was still only a forty-and-found puncher on the Nine-O. He wouldn't be on the Nine-O at all now, if it hadn't been for Millie and Jimmy.

He went around the bed and put one arm about Millie. Just touching her made him both cold and hot all over.

"Why're you standin' up if your ankle's sprained?" he demanded. "Here! You get into that chair."

He made his voice sound gruff, as if he were giving an order. Millie lifted her brown eyes and puckered her mouth at him. He was kissing her before he could check himself. And she whispered, "Oh, Slim," so Jimmy did not hear.

There was a little sob under the words. He put her into the chair. She was wearing some sort of loose garment that parted below her throat. She caught it together quickly, a bright flush on her pretty face.

Travers could feel the hot blood flooding his neck. He felt he should have a look at her sprained ankle, and he set his teeth hard as his hand touched the bandage she had bound upon it.

"Anyway, you've got to have Doc Jones look at that wrench," he said quickly, giving a side glance at Jimmy.

He wanted to kiss Millie again, to hold her in his arms, but he arose stiffly and put the thought from his mind. Hell! He had loved her, he guessed, ever since he had come to ride for old Jim Anson eight years before. But he had kept that to himself.

When old Jim had been found, dry-gulched, shot through the back, Travers had stayed on only because of Millie and the younker.

"I'll see about this doctor thing," he said in a low tone to Millie, and turned away.

AS HE came downstairs into the ranchhouse living room, Travers heard Jake Randall's hard voice.

"What in hell'd you let him go up there for? It ain't any o' his damn' business!"

A woman's voice replied harshly, "I ain't runnin' him, an' there ain't many tells him what ain't his damn' business."

Travers came into the room. Jake Randall's shambling figure was planted in front of the log fire. He turned a pair of shifty eyes and a beaked nose toward Travers.

"I've been lookin' for you, Slim," said Randall. "You ain't havin' the run of the house like you used to."

Travers glanced at the woman sitting at a little table playing solitaire. The woman's face was pretty, except for its hardness and the stuff she used to paint up her cheeks.

She was the woman who had recently become Mrs. Jake Randall. She still had dance-hall girl branded all over her, and Jake did not seem to mind. Travers surmised she was the only kind Jake ever wanted, but he had been burning up inside ever since she had been brought into the same house with Millie and Jimmy.

However, Travers had to remember he was the only one of the old Nine-O riders left. Jake Randall could fire him at any time. He had put up with a lot to

stand by Millie and Jimmy as best he could.

Instead of replying directly to Randall's taunt about him not having the run of the house like he used to, Travers spread his hands before the fire and looked at Randall thoughtfully.

"Little Jimmy's a pretty sick kid, Jake," he said.

"Sick, hell!" growled Randall. "All younkers git colds. He's playin' off mostly to stay up there with his sister. An' she stubs her toe to git out-a helpin' with the house."

For the instant, Travers forgot who was boss of the Nine-O. His big hands clenched, but he controlled himself.

"That kid's edgin' close to pneumonia," he said. "An' if you ain't sent for Doc Jones—"

"When I figger anybody needs a doctor around here, I'll send for him!" snapped Randall.

Travers clicked his teeth together. Dying, the hard way with a bullet in his back, old Jim Anson had seemed to take it for granted that Slim Travers would more or less look after Jimmy and Millie.

Old Jim's step-brother, Jake Randall, had been appointed to look after the big Nine-O spread. He had immediately taken over. All of the old punchers had quickly drifted. Randall's own tough waddies had moved in.

Only Travers had hung on, knowing he was on short time. He had expected Randall to try booting him off the place at the slightest excuse. He had stuck only because he had fought down his feelings and appeared easygoing.

For some time he had an idea he might get a line on the gulcher who had killed old Jim Annson, but he had failed. Right now, Travers saw the heavily shaded, droop-lidded eyes of Mrs. Jake Randall appraising him. There was something more in the look she gave him than should have been in the eyes of any married woman.

"So you figure Jimmy don't need a doctor, Jake?" said Travers calmly. "You ain't talkin' about any hired hand now. That kid up there and his sister own this whole damn' ranch. The kid needs a doctor and a nurse, an' I'm ridin' to town for 'em."

"Keep your shirt on, Travers," said Randall. "Luke's goin' to town tonight, an' I'm havin' him pick up Doc Jones. I didn't say so, 'cause you're so damn' high an mighty around here. So, just to ease your mind, I've another chore laid out for you. There's a bunch of yearlin's missin' at the south end o' Saddle Back, an' I want you to camp down there for a few days."

Travers opened his mouth, but snapped his teeth together.

"A'right, Jake," he said. "I'll pack the warbag an' get movin'."

Mrs. Jake Randall's sleepy eyes smouldered upon him as he went out. There was a little smile on her red lips and Travers couldn't help thinking about how many men had kissed that sultry mouth.

He did not believe Jake Randall was sending Luke Sammons for Doc Jones. So he decided he would head out toward Saddle Back, and turn off to town over the ridge. Might as well get Doc Jones out here without more words or coming to a showdown.

AS Travers came into the bunkhouse, Luke Sammons and the two other riders inside got up. Luke was small with a pointed nose. He always reminded Travers of some kind of sneak rat.

Luke said, "Reckon I'll be movin'. Jake said for you fellas to come along up to the house an' play some cards with him an' the missus."

For all that the ratty Luke was one of Randall's own riders, the way he said "missus" was a downright insult. Big Rod Simms and fat Shorty Jennings grinned sideways at Travers as they followed Luke out into the zero cold. It was not unusual for Randall's three picked riders to join him up at the ranchhouse, but it struck Travers that their departure had been timed for his arrival.

Thinking of the need for haste in getting the doctor for little Jimmy, Travers dismissed the oddity of the other riders moving out from his mind. He had seen

too much "lung fever" at this altitude to take any chances on delay in making his ride to town.

A wind was blowing and hard snow was pelting the bunkhouse windows.

"If it comes on to blow," said Travers, "it'll pile up in Red Gap, an' it might be days 'fore anybody could make it to town or out of it."

He piled his few personal belongings together in the middle of his bunk. He figured he might as well pack his warbag for good and all, after he sent Doc Jones to the Nine-O. But knowing Doc Jones, he was sure Jake Randall wouldn't have much to say once little Jimmy was in the Doc's hands.

Travers was rolling his tarp when the bunkhouse door slammed open. He turned at the blast of nipping air, thinking it was the wind. The short-skirted figure of Mrs. Jake Randall came flying toward him.

"Oh, Slim! Slim!" she cried out huskily. "Jake's gone mad! I took up for you, an' told him he was lyin' about gettin' Doc Jones! He knocked me down, an' said he'd kill me! Slim! You've got to get me away!"

The words rushed from the woman's red lips. Travers, stunned at the suddenness of her appearance, had just time to see that her lacy black waist was torn in front, when she flung herself upon him. He put up his arms instinctively and her hands clasped his neck.

The next instant she was sobbing wildly. Trying to free himself, Travers was acutely conscious of Mrs. Randall's trembling body. Although she had rushed in, with the wild plea for help, she suddenly pulled his head down and her lips were forced against his mouth.

With Travers it was an instant sick anger. He trapped her wrists and jerked her to one side.

"You damn' fool!" he exploded. "You're lyin', an' you know it! So what—"

Travers caught a shadowy movement at one bunkhouse window as he spoke. A head and shoulders showed against the white cold outside. Travers whirled the woman around and lifted her toward the still, open bunkhouse door.

With one heave of his powerful shoulders, he sent Mrs. Randall a dozen feet into the snow outside. She landed on her back, screaming.

Travers had moved so quickly that he was out of line with the windows of the bunkhouse, and now he took advantage of his position to spring outside and flatten himself to the wall. Mrs. Randall was serambling to her feet and still screaming. Travers judged that whoever had been outside the bunkhouse window must be distracted for the moment.

THE snow now was falling fast enough to make a shifting curtain. Mrs. Randall started running, stumbling toward the ranchhouse. Travers slid along the wall and got around a corner on the side away from the ranchhouse.

He moved quickly from there, thumbing the hammer of his gun back and brushing the snowflakes from his eyes. Travers had shifted his position so rapidly that he had fooled the man who had been at the bunkhouse window.

For as he rounded the back of the bunkhouse, he saw ratty Luke Sammons. Luke was crouched in the snow at the front corner of the bunkhouse, watching the doorway through which Mrs. Randall had emerged so suddenly. His back was toward Travers.

Evidently Luke believed Travers was still inside and would come stepping out. Travers held his gun lightly.

"Looking for someone, Luke?" he said softly.

Luke Sammons whirled in the snow. The light shining from the bunkhouse door struck upon his face and gave him the appearance of a wolf that has been trapped. He jerked his hand around with desperate haste, but he had been turned in the wrong direction.

Travers let the hammer of his gun fall onee. The bullet knocked the sneaking rider to his side. Luke's gun exploded and splashed snow at Travers' feet.

Travers strode over and looked down

With one heave of his shoulders he sent her into the snow outside.

at the rider who had tried to gulch him cold.

"It'd been some shenanigan if you'd pulled it off, Luke," he said shortly. "Might've made it look good to the sheriff, too, seein' it would have appeared I was foolin' 'round with Mrs. Randall. Sweet trick, but it missed fire."

Travers saw the ranchhouse door open against the thick snow and he knew Mrs. Randall had passed inside. He moved a little, glancing around the corner of the bunkhouse.

A rifle cracked from a ranchhouse window. The lead chopped splinters off the end of a log almost in Travers' eyes. He jerked back out of sight.

Luke Sammons was sitting in the snow, one hand holding his shoulder. Blood trickled over his fingers. Travers caught him by one foot and pulled him through the snow toward the bunkhouse window on that side. He smashed out a pane and opened the window.

Travers then scooped up Luke's .45 and pushed it inside his shirt.

"Now see if you can stand up, you dry-gulchin' rat!" he ordered, pulling Luke to his feet.

He boosted the wounded man through

the open window. The gulcher's face was white with pain. Blood was wetting his shirt and coming through his jacket.

All the fight was gone out of Luke, as Travers dropped him to the floor. He lay still with his eyes closed and Travers thought he had passed out.

Travers swung across the bunkhouse. He could see the ranchhouse through the swirling snow. Lights had been extinguished and there was only a slight glow from the log fire against one of the windows.

Travers experimented grimly. He started to close the bunkhouse door, keeping well to one side. The rifle cracked again and the bullet whined off the bunkhouse stove. He closed the door all the way and went back to the wounded rider.

TRAVERS felt fairly secure for the moment. Believing him on guard, protected by the thick log walls, it was unlikely that Jake Randall's gunnie riders would try to rush him now. He saw that Luke might bleed to death, and he did not want that.

When he got the wounded man's jacket and shirt away, there was an ugly flesh wound scoring the ribs near the shoulder. Travers tore up a clean shirt and staunched the flow of blood.

Luke opened his eyes and his lips were white.

"Just what the hell was the idea?" said Travers. "We've never had any ruckus between us."

Luke's mouth twisted. "Maybe Jake Randall will tell you, you foolin' around with his missus," he said.

Travers lifted his gun and drew the hammer back.

"You saw all of Mrs. Randall's damn' fool play," he said quietly. "Now I'm askin' you just this once more, what's your idea?"

"Randall told me to get you," muttered Luke.

"Any reason, or was it Randall's idea of fun?"

"How in hell would I know?" snarled Luke. "I only work for him."

Travers gestured with his gun. "Sit up!" he said.

Luke looked into his eyes and pulled himself up, groaning. Travers pulled him to his feet.

"Now go over and open the bunkhouse door and walk out!" he commanded.

Luke stared at him and his face turned whiter than it had been.

"I can't do it," he said. "They won't know it's me in this snow and I'll be killed."

"Too bad," said Travers, prodding Luke with his gun. "Do you tell me more of what you know or do I push you through that door?"

Luke's retreating chin trembled and his lips twisted.

"Whatcha want to know?"

"First off, why did Jake Randall send you out to gun me?"

"He figured you'd raise hell, an' ride to town for Doc Jones. He don't want a doctor."

"Why?"

"He figures the kid has a good chance o' dyin', an' Millie ain't any real blood kin o' the Ansons. Old Jim took 'er when her pa an' ma was killed in a runaway. He give 'er his name, but they wasn't any legal adoption."

Travers bit off a hard oath. "So that makes Jake Randall next of kin, an' he'd take over the Nine-O?"

"Sure," said Luke. "It's a big spread, twice the size o' Jake's own scant range."

Because he was clean-thinking, Slim Travers had never thought along this line before, even though he hated Randalls guts. He spoke suddenly.

"So that was the reason for Randall killin' old Jim?"

Luke's eyes bugged a little and he spoke too quickly.

"How'd you find that out?"

Travers said evenly, "You just now told me."

Luke was sick, apparently. He slumped back on the bunk and closed his eyes. His face was chalky.

"You stay there an' keep quiet," said Travers. "I've got to figure this out."

He went back to the window nighest

the ranchhouse. The big house loomed starkly through the whirling snow. In that house was a killer with two gunnie riders. He had killed old Jim Anson and he had gone too far now to back out on finishing off Travers.

What would happen to little Jimmy and Millie? Even if she had a chance, Millie could not get to a horse with her crippled ankle. But if she got the chance, she might try it in the below zero blizzard. The way the snow was whipping now, Travers judged it would fill Red Gap pass ten feet deep in a few hours.

COME morning, all chance of getting Doc Jones would be ended. A gun roared from the big house again. The window shattered and glass tinkled to the floor. Travers smashed a couple of shots from his own gun toward the ranchhouse.

"They can't get at me in here, but that don't help," he muttered.

Still standing by the window he took Luke Sammons' dropped gun from his shirt. He broke it, took out the one empty shell and slipped in a fresh cartridge. He slipped the gun back into his shirt and took his own gun from its holster.

Five seconds later he crossed over and looked down at Luke on the bunk.

"I'm tyin' you up, Luke," he said harshly. "I'm makin' a try for a hoss."

He turned slowly, glancing at the door and the windows, as if estimating his chances of getting to the stable alive. There was a snappy jerk at his hip.

Luke's venomous voice snapped, "Now damn' you, Travers! Git 'em up, an' keep 'em there!"

When Travers turned, Luke's eyes were burning with savage elation. He held Travers' own .45 leveled at his stomach. He sat up on the edge of the bunk, an evil grin distorting his mouth.

Travers could see murder in the pale eyes, so he lifted his hands.

"You're a smelly, little polecat, Luke," he said.

Luke said, "Now you turn around an' walk to the door. You're doin' the openin' an' the walkin' out. If you live, we'll have a little talk with Jake."

Travers kept his mouth closed and walked to the door, As Luke prodded with the gun, he opened the door and stood there in the light. But the snow had thickened until the ranchhouse was almost invisible.

"Start shaggin'!" snapped Luke gloatingly. "Jake'll like this one!"

There was nothing to do, apparently, but obey. Travers stepped into the deepening snow and started walking up the hill toward the house. It was not much more than fifty yards, but it seemed a long mile, and Travers held his breath most of the way.

Travers reached the porch and still no shot was fired. He judged then that Randall and the others had seen his position as Luke had walked him closer.

Behind him Luke said, "Don't bother to make a noise. Walk right on in."

The door swung wide as Luke spoke. Jake Randall's beaked nose and beady eyes showed.

"Good job, Luke," he said. "Come in, Travers. So, you've been honin' to fill my shoes with the missus?"

Hate was in Mrs. Randall's eyes as she looked at Travers. He guessed he was the first hombre who had ever heaved her out in the snow when she had made a play like that.

Travers saw big Rod Simms standing by the fireplace holding a rifle. Shorty Jennings filled the kitchen doorway, grinning at him without any humor.

Luke continued to bore the gun into Travers' back. From the way the weapon quivered in Luke's hand, Travers judged he was pretty sick from his wound.

"What're you goin' to do with him, Jake?" said Mrs. Randall.

Jake's mouth was a straight slash. "I was thinkin', honey, if you an' him had a gun accident while you was together in our room, the law might sort o' overlook the details," he said harshly. "After all, Millie's the rightful one to be Mrs. Randall, and—"

Travers kept control of himself by biting into his own tongue. Mrs. Randall

cried out and started up from her chair. Jake's big hand slapped across her teeth and she sat down again.

"You'll have to take 'im, Jake," said Luke, and the gun in Travers' back wobbled.

TRAVERS marked that Jake Randall and Rod Simms were standing in line directly in front of him. He took one long step.

"Stay where you are, Travers!" barked Randall. "Lemme see now? That's it. Shorty, you git a rope, an' we'll tie him an' the missus together an' put 'em in the bedroom."

It was a crude idea, but at that Travers could see how it might be made to work. For just then, Jake reached out and with one clawing hand tore Mrs. Randall's lacy blouse.

Jake slapped the woman down again as she screamed.

"Did anybody ever tell you you're a rotten hunk of carrion, Jake?" said Travers evenly.

Travers was standing balanced on his toes. He was adding up his chances, figuring the odds against him. There didn't seem much chance. Luke was stabbing him in the back with his own gun. The three armed men were in front of him.

Then Travers took one more step toward Jake Randall.

"Why not beef me now an' leave your missus out've it?" he said. "The same way you beefed old Jim Anson, in the back?"

Travers' accusation hit home. Randall's hawklike face lost its color, was white with fury.

"Bigosh! You've hit it, Travers!" His voice snarled and his hand slid to the gun at his hip. His movement placed him between Travers and his other two gunnies.

Randall didn't get his gun into play. Travers' right fist blurred out and drove Randall back on his heels. One of the men shouted, but Travers' fist smashed again and spun Randall across the room.

Travers had a glimpse of Millie, white-faced, standing in the doorway to the stairs.

"Stay back, Millie!" he cried out. "Keep out-a line!"

The big living room all at once was converted into a wild, crashing scene of fury. Travers ripped down his shirt front to grab the gun he had hidden there. It was Luke's gun, the one Travers had picked up from the snow.

The gun was smoking and jumping as it came up. Jake Randall had been knocked to one side and Rod Simms was trying to bring his rifle into line. A slug from Travers' smashing gun knocked the rifle from Rod's hands and spun him around to fall on the floor.

Travers jumped all the way across the room, whirling with his back to the wall. He had them all before him now. Jake Randall was on the floor. Shorty Jennings was still in the kitchen doorway. Jennings was tugging at his six-gun.

Luke Sammons was standing in the middle of the floor. He was holding a .45 dangling loosely in his hands. Although he had but a one to three chance of living, Travers laughed shortly as he saw the expression on Luke's face.

It was no time for laughing. He had that split second of advantage, the drop that gave him his only chance. Shorty Jennings took his hand away from his holster as Travers swung his gun in a little arc that covered him.

The mad puncher's voice cracked like a whiplash.

"Don't try it, Shorty! You'll lose, sure as hell!"

Shorty Jennings hesitated, then he raised his hands high. Luke Sammons was still staring, the gun loose in his hands, a bewildered expression on his small, rat-like face.

Then Jake Randall pulled himself to a sitting position. He looked at his own gun, which had fallen from his hands and lay two feet away.

"I wouldn't, Jake!" warned Travers. "But I wish you'd make a reach for it!"

Randall's hard lips curled back.

"I'll see you in hell!" he roared, lunging toward his gun.

THE room echoed with a single shot. Randall's fingers closed upon his gun, but they slipped off again. He fell on his face and lay still.

"Too bad," said Travers, "but it'll save the county payin' for a trial. Now you, Mrs. Randall, get some rope. Do a job of tying on these other skunks that'll hold. You know now where you stood."

"I'll tie 'em so tight they'll bust their guts tryin' to get loose!" cried out Mrs. Randall, running to the kitchen for rope.

Jake Randall was decisively dead. Simms, with a bleeding arm, and Jennings, disarmed by Travers, were tightly bound in chairs by the angry Mrs. Randall, who pulled the knots with vicious enthusiasm.

Travers himself pushed Luke Sammons into a chair and whipped rope around him. It was not until he was tightly held that Luke broke the silence. He looked up at the tall puncher.

Millie Anson had limped over, and Travers was holding her in the crook of one arm.

"Say," blurted Luke Sammons, "what in hell was wrong with that gun, the one I grabbed out-a your holster?"

"It's all right, a damn' good gun," said Travers.

"But it wouldn't shoot."

"Maybe so, that's because I'd taken all the bullets out'a it," said Travers. "That was just 'fore I let you grab it."

Travers turned to Mrs. Randall.

He said, "We're forgettin' all about what happened earlier, Mrs. Randall, providin' you do one thing. I'm saddlin' a hoss for you, an' you ride hell bent to town for Doc Jones. Do that, an' I reckon the law'll say you have a widow's rights to Jake's old spread."

Mrs. Randall looked at Travers. The hate had gone out of her eyes.

"I'll be ready by the time you bring up the horse," she said.

Gray-haired Dr. Jones, driving a sleigh, reached the Nine-O shortly before midnight. Sheriff Callahan was with him. When Doc Jones saw the men in the living room, he made as if to stop.

Travers helped him on upstairs.

"These gents will keep," he said. "Little Jimmy is damn' sick."

The sheriff started questioning Travers, especially about the dead Jake.

"It was self-defense, and I heard Uncle Jake say he'd killed my dad," Millie sobbed.

In a little while Doc Jones came down the stairs. He was smiling a little.

"Jimmy's a mighty sick boy," he said, "but I reckon I can pull him through all right."

Sheriff Callahan said, "If you've got time, doc, Luke an' Simms here have got bullet holes in 'em."

Doc Jones looked at Rod Simms, now lying on a blanket. He glanced at Luke Sammons, propped up in an easy chair. Shorty Jennings was bound in a chair.

The sheriff's voice was dry.

"As I gather it, Jake Randall and Slim Travers was havin' a little argument over whether Jimmy Anson needed a doctor," he said. "It appears that Slim was downright convincing."

Dr. Jones rubbed his gray-stubbled jaw and looked at Travers and Millie Anson. His blue eyes twinkled.

Millie's brown eyes were shining.

"Slim hasn't asked me, Doc Jones," Millie said quietly. "But if Judge Harper can make it out here through the storm, it'll be a big favor."

"But, Millie, dammit!" exclaimed Travers, "I ain't nothin' but a forty-and-found rider, and you're the owner—"

He stopped speaking and his face reddened. Hell! Luke had said Millie didn't even own the Anson name. He guessed maybe she didn't know that. But she smiled at Slim.

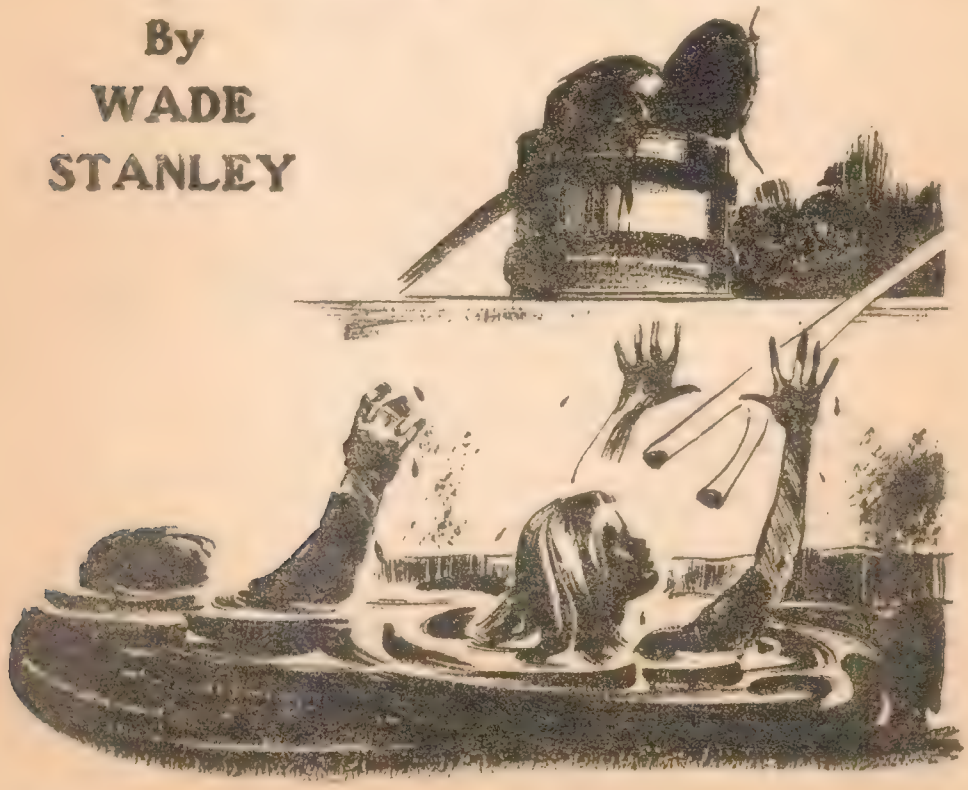
"Only little Jimmy owns the Nine-O, Slim," she said. "I don't own anything except what Jim Anson gave me. I guess Jimmy would want us to keep on running the Nine-O for him. If you don't want me the way Doc Jones says, maybe Judge Harper could fix it up for you to adopt me, and that way I'd have a name of my own."

"Like all hell I'll adopt you!" Slim Travers grinned.

DYNAMITE DIP

There was some ringtailed skunkaroo, or a collection of same, on this range who didn't think that cattle should be dipped, and who was, or were, a heap too willing to use dynamite to prove the theory was correct—and cowprod Seel aimed to disprove it!

By WADE STANLEY



BILL SEEL reined up and stared at the wreckage of a dipping-vat. Gateposts and chute timbers were splintered and the concrete vat had caved in. Seel studied the ragged chunks of concrete while he rolled a cigarette.

"Dynamite did that," he thought. "Somebody on this range don't take to the idea that cattle should be dipped. Plumb strange . . . an' makes me curious. I don't like hombres who take to usin' dynamite!"

Seel slapped one hand against his leather leggings as he rode toward the timbered bank of Moonspray River. He shrugged broad shoulders impatiently, rested the fingers of his right hand on the worn butt of a .45 in a plain quick-draw holster, and turned east at the river's curving timber line.

"In Oklahoma," Seel reflected, "Moonspray River would be called a crick. An' the outfit that wrecked dippin' vats would be called on to decorate a limb! I reckon I'll have to educate my neighbors before I move my outfit in up here."

He slowed his pace as he rounded a bend, his attention attracted by a slender youth near the riverbank. Clad in a faded flannel shirt, worn waist, overalls, and

Bill Seel yelled: "Grab!" and thrust the stick into the girl's grasping hands.

Illustrated by Joseph Sokoli

scuffed boots, the young hand had his back to Bill Seel.

Seel watched him draw creosote dip from a barrel and pour it into the sloping concrete dipping vat near the river. New posts and timbers indicated this vat had just been built.

The cowboy tossed the bucket aside and laid hands to the handle of a "One-arm John" and commenced heaving back and forth. The little one-cylinder pump made a monotonous clicking-squeezing sound as it sucked water from the narrow stream and ran it into the dipping vat.

Bill Seel then turned his attention to the horseman who rode out of the light timber across the Moonspray, and something prompted him to pull his horse behind a screen of willows. He watched the rider cross the stream and dismount close to the vat.

The noise of the Moonspray and the clicking of the pump covered the sound of the man's approach. He came up behind the slender cowhand, touched his shoulder, and stepped back.

Seel watched the youth as he whirled, and then recoiled. The tall man moved, grabbed the wooden pump handle and

yanked it loose; he raised one foot and pushed the little pump toward the river. The boy hesitated, rushed the other, and was met with open arms.

A high-pitched scream sounded and the lad's old hat fell off. Bill Seel hit his horse with the hooks and snarled, "The little one's a girl!"

IT WAS a girl, whose yellow hair came down to her shoulders as she struggled in the arms of the tall, gaunt man.

Seel seemed to squirt out of the saddle. He had a good look at the tall man, who put the girl on her feet, crooked his left arm around her neck and held her with her back to him.

Seel had seen a lot of hideous faces in his time; but never a map to match this fellow's. His dark eyes were set deeply in bony sockets under a narrow, overhanging brow. His nose was thin, his mouth a gashed line that seemed a knife-slit in his yellow skin. He looked like something that had kicked out of a coffin: a yellowing, living corpse.

"Let 'er go, blast you!" Seel yelled as the graveyard citizen backed up, holding the girl in front of him.

"Keep back!" The man's voice was a hollow, funereal sound. "Don'tcha!" as Seel moved around and reached for him. The man's free right hand dropped and started to rise, lifting a gun from the leather as it came up.

The girl squirmed, set her bootheels into the ground and pushed backward. The man stumbled. His gun roared and bits of earth and dry grass flew up close to Bill Seel's feet. Bill grabbed at the girl and missed her as the other man lost balance and started falling backward. He kept his arm around the girl's neck and pulled her with him.

"Look out!"

Seel's warning was wasted. The big man swore and the girl screamed as they went backward into the open dipping vat. Water and creosote splashed up, closed over the two. Seel felt sick at his stomach as he grabbed up the heavy, long forked tree limb—the ducking pole used to shove an animal's head under as it swam through the vat—someone had cut and put in readiness.

The big man's head broke the surface first; the girl came up, choking, strangling, blinded and tortured and smothering in the creosote bath. The man grabbed at the pole. Seel jerked it out of his reach.

"Grab!" he yelled, thrusting the stick into the girl's frantically clutching hands. She held on. Seel pulled her to the incline and her feet touched bottom. She hung on, trying to walk as he pulled her on out.

The man in the vat was fighting, trying to get his breath. He found bottom, then came crawling up the vat's exit slope on hands and knees.

He flattened out, gagging, writhing as the creosote began to burn his skin. "My eyes!" he choked. "Gimme somethin' to wipe my eyes on. H'p me, fella. Do somethin'."

"Crawl 'n the river, if you can find it!" Seel snarled. He steadied the girl, held her at arm's length and helped her to the water. "Lay down in it," he commanded. He stood in the water, bent, tugged at her boots.

THE girl ducked her head, spurted a mouthful of water, ducked under again. "Hang on to a rock an' soak a second," Seel ordered. The girl kept her eyes closed tightly and nodded to indicate she understood.

Seel turned to the man who'd crawled into the water below them. "Here's a piece of my shirt tail," Seel snarled. "Wipe your eyes, get on your horse an' get out of here!"

The man grabbed the piece of cloth. "I ain't ridin' until I get this burnin', chokin', stingin' stuff off me!" He groaned and rolled in the water as he wiped his eyes.

"You'll ride!" Seel snapped. He started the man to his feet by booting him in the ribs. "Tail it!" Seel spat. "I ought to fist whip you on a couple counts. I got a better idea than that. I'll save you up for a killin' later on."

"I'll burn up by the time I get back to the ranch," the man protested, blinking his reddening eyes.

Seel yanked his gun. "Get on your horse or dive back in the vat! You hear me preach."

The man staggered to his horse. The animal snorted as he hauled himself into the saddle. He bounced up when he put his weight on the hull and was standing in the stirrups as he rode away, crying in a hoarse, pain-filled voice: "I'll see you in hell for the hell I'm in right now!"

The girl was sitting in water to her neck when Seel turned back to her. She was biting her lips, moving in protest of the pains burning her.

"Get out of them dip-soaked duds," Seel commanded.

"Why, I will not! You think—"

"I ain't needin' to think. I'm tellin' you. Pull your clothes off an' soak in your birthday suit. I'm goin' to get some stuff to fix you up. If you don't take off them rags, I'll take them off for you!"

He presented his back to her as he moved toward his horse. The girl glared at him and started to get out of the water. She whimpered, sat down until the stream ran around her neck again, and commenced to shuck her clothes.

Seel tried to appear cool and impassive as he returned. He stood knee-deep in the Moonspray, a blanket over one arm, a flat can of salve in his hands. The girl sat with her knees drawn up under her chin.

Seel twisted the lid off the can and dipped his fingers in the salve. "This'll stop that creosote from burnin' any more," he said.

Seel touched the salve to her back and shoulders, and he cursed himself for being clumsy as he almost dropped the can. The girl shivered, caught her breath, then stood still.

"Th-there," said Seel, moving back. "Here. Take the can. I'll turn my back."

WHEN she faced him again, she had his blanket wrapped around her. "I feel much better," she told him, avoiding his direct gaze. "I'd like to know who you are."

"I'd like to know who you are," Seel told her.

"I'm Naida York."

"An' I'm Bill Seel."

"Oh! Why, you're the man who arranged to buy part of my uncle Yap's ranch—before he disappeared."

"Before he what?" Seel blurted. "I heard you, Miss York. An' I don't understand. There's a lot of things I don't understand, y'see. I'll bring up your horse an' we'll head for your place. You can talk while we ride."

He helped her into the saddle and tucked her blanket around her.

They rode on, following the line of the river. There was a break in the timber. Naida York waved one hand. "See, over there about three miles? That's the top of Kate Strang's house."

"You mention her name like you feared an' hated her," said Seel.

"I do. Even worse than I fear Corpse Fister. Seel, you will have to watch that devil. He'll carry out his treat to get you."

"I can do some gettin' on my own," Seel grunted. "Corpse Fister, eh? Ain't he the foreman of Kate Strang's spread?"

"He is. He seems to have more to say about the run of the ranch than Kate Strang does. He and a gunman called Squint Yallow are a pair of killers out and out."

"We kill killers where I come from," Seel said. "I got a nice bunch of beef an' some salty Sooners herdin' them this way. Which reminds me. How about the sale of part of your range to me?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. You'll have to see the bank, in Prong-horn. My uncle owes them money. He dealt in there."

"Which brings us to the question of his disappearin'," Bill Seel said. He scowled. "Why should Yap York disappear?"

"I don't know!" Naida exclaimed. "You see, mister—all right, Bill—we've been having trouble with Kate Strang's outfit. They came in here a couple—

three years back. First thing, they started crowding free range, buying more range, making it tough for the rest of us.

"The Strang ranch—well, it's funny. It runs into the Pronghorn Hills. It isn't healthy for a rider from any other outfit to go in there. The Strang brand doesn't stand for honesty—I'll tell you that! One month, there will be cattle on Strang range that bears brands of outfits not known in this State. Then those cattle just vanish. More cattle show up—with vented or blotched brands as strange as the ones before."

Bill Seel nodded. Muscle rippled along the line of his square jaw. "Yeah," he muttered. "Yeah! . . . Well, go on. What's the trouble over dippin'? Who blew up that vat?"

"The dipping trouble started a few months back. My uncle claimed he found a couple of steers carrying Texas fever ticks. He killed them. Their brands had been blotched until they couldn't be read. My uncle started building a vat. He said he was going to dip, and then aimed to go after the State to make all the other cattlemen do the same."

"I see. The Strang outfit objected because they didn't want State inspectors messin' around up here, checkin' their cattle one by one as they was bein' dipped."

"I guess so," Naida answered. "Anyhow, Corpse Fister told my uncle he'd see him in hell before he would see him start dipping. Getting all the ranchers in for useless, extra work, Fister called it.

"MY uncle ran him off with a rifle. A few nights later, someone poured raw creosote and kerosene on the vat and burned the chute and pen to the ground; my uncle built them back. He and Pap Parker—who is old, and the only year-'round hand we have—took turns guarding the vat at night. We were dipping a few head each day—just the three of us.

"My uncle was glad to hear an Oklahoma outfit wanted to come here. He said a tough crew on this range, bucking the Strang outfit, would be a good thing. So it wasn't alone the need of money that caused him to agree to sell."

Seel nodded. The girl went on: "One night, about a month ago, when my uncle was on watch at the old vat, we heard an explosion. Pap Parker and I rode out. The vat had been dynamited; my uncle had disappeared. His horse came home a day later. There was blood on the saddle.

"Sheriff Clint made Kate Strang put her riders at his disposal, and they combed the hills. Pap rode along. He said a bunch of cattle that had been on Strang range a week before, had just vanished. Anyhow, my uncle was never found."

Seel was silent the rest of the ride to the York place. He helped the girl dismount before a weathered four room house. A stove-up old-timer with a mess of gray whiskers came hobbling up from a barn, blinked at Naida in her strange covering and turned to Seel.

"What kind of business is this, stranger?" Pap Parker rapped. He ran a practised eye over Seel's gear. Seel rode an Oklahoma saddle, double-rigged, square-skirted, block stamped. Plain dragoon tapaderos covered his rawhide-wrapped oxbow stirrups. Pap looked at the thin, leather-wrapped saddle horn and the coiled maguey rope.

Pap muttered, "A fool hard an' fast man, who sits tied to a boogery steer in postoak an' blackjack country, where you do down with your hoss, or grab a knife an' cut loose—if you can. Fella—" without asking Seel's name—"why didn't you say your name was Seel, from Oklahomy way?"

Seel warmed to the old man, who asked Seel to take the saddle off Naida's horse, explaining: "I straint my back liftin' a sack of cee-ment when I was buildin' that new vat."

Naida went into the house. Seel led the girl's horse toward the barn, Pap Parker falling in step with him. As Seel related details of the brawl at the dip-

ping vat, Pap Parker clenched his fists and swore under his breath.

"I wisht I was a few years younger! he raged. "Fister darin' to tech a hand to Naida like that. Why didn't you gut shoot the coyote, Seel?"

"Maybe later. Figger 'er for yourse'f, Pap, how Corpse Fister felt, ridin' home with that creosote burnin' him."

"I hope it peels him," Pap snarled. "Personal, I'd like to take that Kate Strang an' dunk her in raw dip. Because she's a woman, an' lets him an' that one think she's into love with them, she gits by with things a man'd git strung up for."

"Maybe I'll fall in love with her myself," said Seel.

Naida had come up behind him. She stopped, catching her breath when Seel said he might fall in love with Kate Strang. Naida hurled the blanket at Seel, and it unfolded and settled over his head. He fought out of it and turned. Naida, head high, was heading for the house.

"Wait!" Seel begged. "I wasn't meanin' nothin'."

"I don't care if you were!" she cried. "Get off this ranch. Go to her you—you Sooner! Don't come back here again."

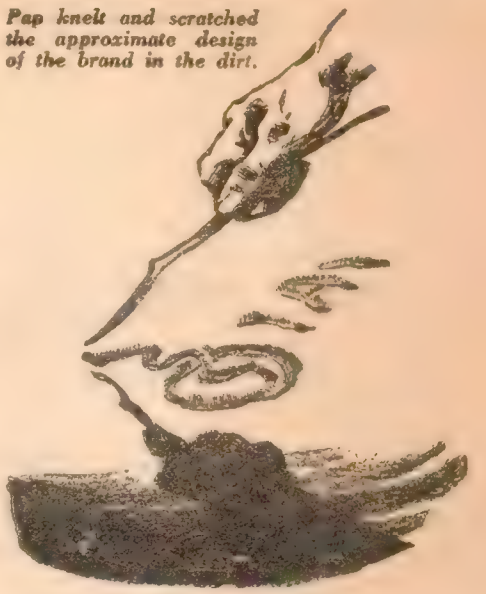
"Pap, ain't that hell?" Seel demanded, turning to the old man.

"Dont'cha let her or nothin' else stop you from comin' here," Pap advised. "You see the bank, an' then bring your Oklahomy outfit on up here."

"Pap, my outfit has started. Coming slow, too, an' doin' a little work on the way. I'll tell you what I mean, after I go have a talk with this here Kate Strang. Before I go, there's just one question I'd like to ask:

"Have you found any more of them gaunt, hide-sacked walkin' bone yards of steers with Texas fever?"

"Four. I never mentioned it to Naida. I kilt them, an' I burnt the part of the range they was on. Them steers looked like they was lost out of a hurry-up drive. We ain't never been bothered with them Texas fever ticks up here. I don't know what parts them steers come from, either. They had vented brands, an'



Pap knelt and scratched the approximate design of the brand in the dirt.

blotched trail brands. The ownership brands on these last ones was like this."

Pap held his back, knelt, took a twig and scratched in the dirt. "One brand was like this. Other one curlicued up in this way."

"First one you drew, Pop, is a outfit runnin' in Colorado an' New Mexico. That other one *is* a curlicue—the name of a outfit runnin' in the Texas Panhandle, an' beyond No Man's Land in Oklahoma, into Kansas. The Curlicue has been quarantined on account of Texas fever. The Colorado outfit is tryin' to fight it out."

"How'd them steers git up this far into Wyomin'?" Pap demanded.

"On a highway bein' run by rustlers an' owlhooters that're formin' a chain that threatens a part of the range from Montana to Mexico!" Seel snarled. He started for his horse. "Pap, can you stand the saddle?" he called back.

"Some. Why?"

"I'd like to meet you in Pronghorn in about three hours. At the bank."

"I'll be there," Pap Parker said. "You act like you aimed to start things hummin'?"

"They're already started," Seel called reply. "An' if a few ideas I got comes

right—an' I have my talk out with Kate Strang—they're whizzin' to a blowup mighty soon."

A MAN whose puckery eyelids gave him a perpetual squinty look, turned to stare at Seel when he dismounted by the Strang ranch house. He hooked his thumbs under his cartridge belt and came over to Seel, stopped, teetered on his heels, spat, called Seel a fighting word.

"I'll remember that—just like I seem to remember your face on a reward poster I saw—let's see—in Kingfisher, I think it was," Seel told him, curbing a bucking temper. "I guess your name is Squint Yallow. An' I got an idea you got yellow down your back. You want to argue it?"

"It ain't my turn at you," Yallow snarled. "When Corpse gets done with you, I'll have at what's left—if anything. I hope you stick around until Corpse gets back from town. Maybe your mem'ry for reward posters won't stay so good."

Seel shrugged, forced himself to yawn in Yallow's face, and turned to the house. Kate Strang stood back after she opened the door. She smiled flatly, turned and motioned him to follow her.

In a low-ceilinged living room, she turned to face him.

"Long time no see you, Bill," she said.

"That's true," he answered. "Let's see. Last time was in that outlaw dive in No Man's Land. When we started teachin' them owlhooters to keep their ropes an' irons off S-in-a-Wineglass beef, you tried to protect Baron Welke. I remember I was beatin' his face with a pistol. You didn't like that, an' you butted in."

A tall, shapely, dark woman, she came close to Bill Seel. "If you'd fallen for me, Bill, like I always wanted you to, I wouldn't got mixed up with Baron Welke's kind. Well, you ruined his looks. I left him, changed my last name and came here. I'm an honest ranch-woman now, Bill. Here, sit down."

Seel sat down beside her on a blanket-covered couch.

Kate Strang said: "I hated to hear you intended moving your Oklahoma outfit here, Bill. There's not room enough on the range. Why don't you give it up? Look—stay here and run this place for me. Leave your stock in Oklahoma. Sell out there."

Bill Seel closed his eyes, not wanting to see Kate Strang; he thought of Naida, sitting in Moonspray River, looking up at him.

Kate drew back. "I love you, Bill. Just don't try to move in on this range. You'd have a hard time, any way."

BILL pushed her away and stood up. "Not too hard, Kate. You're thinkin' of quarantines along the trail, ain't you? It was careless of Baron Welke's rustlers to run fevered cattle along the owlhoot chain. Well, that's goin' to be stopped, Kate. I'm movin' my outfit up here because this is better range for me to spread on. I ain't movin' in to be troubled with a rustlin' link as a neighbor. From here to the Mex Border, Kate, Baron Welke's got crooked ranchers spotted. Beef is run from Southwest up in here. It's shifted blotched, shifted again, up an' down the line. Then crooked brand inspectors let the stuff get to market. Now this hand-to-hand passin' of stolen beef has started a spread of disease."

The woman sat and glared at Bill. Bill went on: "You hate me because I turned away from you. You got in with Welke, an' you're still in with him. He sent you here, at the head of the rustlin' chain, because a woman can get by with a lot more than a man. It's Fister, though, that really runs this spread for Welke! Well, my outfit is comin' on, Kate. Cleanin' up, with the help of local an' State officers along the highroad from here to Mexico. A little Texas tick left a trail for us to follow, Kate. Not only am I movin' in here—but my outfit is gettin' plenty for helpin' mess you up!"

"I got a notion to kill you!" the woman croaked. Her face was harsh, twisted, and Bill knew she wouldn't hesitate to kill if it suited her.

"Go ahead, Kate. But remember, my

outfit will come on, anyhow. Tell Fister that."

"Fister's gone in to the doctor. That creosote—"

"It'll preserve his corpse carcass," Seel snapped. "It—"

He frowned, half closed his eyes as a sudden idea struck him. "Just like it is preservin' Yap York's body, Kate."

"I don't know what you mean!" Kate snarled.

"You will, come time I clean up at that dippin' vat you had ruined with dynamite!"

He heard her swear as he walked out of the room. As he rode away, she came to the door and yelled: "You can't prove a thing, you fool! And you'll find you won't be able to move in up here."

"Don't forget Yap York," Bill Seel called back.

He went on. Pap Parker met him where the trail from the York spread joined the road to town. As they rode on together, Bill Seel told Pap Parker how things stood.

"The rustlin' chain never bothered me much, Pap, until I decided to come up here. It was then I found out about Kate bein' at this end of the line, with Welke on the other end. I told the authorities of six States I'd try to clean things up. My outfit is followin' a Texas fever trail. They're all strung out, waitin' word from this end. When they get it, they'll have the help of a hundred law officers, an' they'll move in—like that!" He snapped his fingers.

"Yeah," Pap mumbled. "But you ain't proved nothin' yet."

Seel started to mention Yap York, then changed his mind. He'd tilt that hole card a little later. After all, it was just a guess.

AS THEY rode into the little cowtown and tied up at a long hitchrail, Pap Parker said: "Speakin' of that Kate, now. Naida sure did seem madded a lot. Was throwin' things an' kickin' chairs when I left the house."

"Mad?"

"Wal, that—or fallin' in love."

Pap Parker introduced Seel to the banker in Pronghorn. And the banker came right to the point. "You can't buy an interest in the York ranch until it's been definitely established Yap York is dead." The banker sighed. "Believe me, I wish you could. Taxes, interests on notes are eating the place up the way things are now. I had to sell part of our paper on the place."

"To Kate Strang?"

"To Kate Strang, yes."

"If things run on, Naida York went busted, or somethin' happened to her, Kate Strang'd get the place, then?"

"I'm afraid she would."

"Stop bein' afraid," Seel grunted, and motioned Pap he was ready to go.

They went into Ben's bar, had a few drinks, got a bottle, got their horses, and started out of town. Pap cleared his throat. "You reckon Naida'll let you on the spread?" he inquired.

"We ain't goin' to the house, Pap," Seel answered. "I aim to roost out by that old wrecked dippin' vat tonight."

"You fool," Pap yapped. "I got a new one to stand guard over. I told Naida to watch it until I got back—if I was gone when it come night. That other one is done. Why sit an' watch over it?"

"Because I got an idea Yap York is down in that dirt an' creosote an' cement," Seel said. "I got somebody to thinkin'. Told Kate I aimed to dig in the wreckage."

"Bigod!" Pap swore. "Why didn't we think of that before? Yap's horse an' saddle—why they likely led it 'way off to make 'er seem like Yap was kilt up in the hills. Seel, I'll go git a shovel an' crowbar an' we'll git right at it. If we find Yap, that woman an' Fister an' Yallow will hang higher than kites!"

"Maybe you want that job. I don't," Seel said. "Me—I'd just fill up that vat, all level, an' let Yap York rest right there. I ain't doin' no diggin'. If I'm right, we won't have to. There's the old vat over there. Pile off, Pap. Don't talk. Just wait an' watch. . . ."

A dim slice of moon, distant stars made a little light. Somewhere a coyote

yapped, a rising night wind whispered across the range. Old Pap shivered and started to speak. Seel grabbed his arm and squeezed for silence.

TWO horsemen came toward the vat, vague blurs detaching from the background of the night. They dismounted, untied something from their saddles. The clang of a shovel broke the quietude. Squint Yallow's voice was shuddery when he complained:

"We should've carted him off an' buried him some're else. Now we got to dig down an' get him. I don't like it! Why not shoot hell out of that Seel an'—?"

"Wherever he is, he'll come tailin' when the big boom breaks. Which'll be as soon as we get York up. When we bust Seel, we don't know what sorta hunt'll be put up. We can't take chances on York bein' found—since Seel got the idea of looking in this ruin," Corpse Fister answered.

"It boogers a man, havin' to dig down here," Yallow croaked.

"Shut up an' get down in there. Think I'm enjoyin' myself? Ever time I move, or my clothes touch me, I damn' near keel over. Wait'll the blowup, an' I line my sights on that Seel!"

Before Pap Parker knew what was up, Bill Seel had risen. His gun slithered from the holster and the hammer made a chill sound as Seel thumbed it back. Quick, long strides carried Seel toward the wrecked vat.

"Start linin', Corpse. That, or you an' Yallow come peaceful, both paws in the air."

"Get'm!" Fister bawled at Yallow. Fister faded back, going for his gun.

Seel let his hammer fall, thumbed it back, and dropped it on another cap. The roar of the pistol thundered over the range. There came the sickening sound of lead striking yielding flesh. Corpse Fister cried out. The sound was repeated as Seel fired again. Corpse Fister's rising scream became a burble; he flailed the air with both arms as he collapsed, rolled, kicked convulsively and then was still.

Down in the hole amid the torn planks and cement, Squint Yallow thrust his head up, raised his gun. The dirty flame flashed toward the zig-zagging dark form of Bill Seel. Seel felt the bullet tug at his jacket, threw a shot at the gun-flash and leaped ahead.

Yallow cursed and blinked out the dirt Seel's slug had thrown in his eyes. He leaned back, and a croak of despair passed his lips as he raised his gun muzzle. Bill Seel stood at the edge of the ruined dipping vat. The fire lashed downward from his gun.

Then there was nothing but the excited voice of Pap Parker to rake the curtain of silence aside. . . .

They rode on toward the new vat, then, where Naida was standing guard. "I want her to ride for the sheriff," Seel told Pap. "I'm goin' on over an' round Kate up. She's got to talk—an' I bet she will. I—What's that?"

"Pap? Seel Hurry, please!" Naida's voice came out of the night ahead of them. Seel swung out of the saddle and ran to the girl.

"Naida!" he exclaimed.

The girl drew a deep breath.

A dark blotch on the ground near Naida, groaned and moved, then cried out in choked, strangled tones. "Mi-god, do something for me. I'm burning alive."

"That's Kate!" Seel exclaimed.

"It—is!" Naida panted. "She came sneaking up here, with dynamite in her hands, all capped and fused. I jumped her. I thought for a moment she was going to kill me. And then I remembered, broke away from her, and ran toward the dipping vat. I dropped down, she fell over me and went in head first!"

"Help me," Kate begged.

"What was that shooting?" Naida demanded.

"It was Fister an' Yallow. Seel finished them, Naida," Pap Parker said. "Uh, we know where Yap is, honey. We'll

leave him there. It's best that way. Seel can explain it to you."

"Ain't you going to help me?" Kate Strang begged.

"We'll help you, if you'll tell us why *you* was aimin' to dynamite this vat," Seel grunted. "Why didn't some of your hands do the job?"

"I WANTED to do it myself! Oh, I wanted to see you die! And you—you got Corpse and Yallow, eh? I might have guessed you'd pull a trick. I intended dynamiting this vat as soon as they came from digging York up to take off and bury in the hills. I thought you'd be at the York wench's place, hear the blast and come here. Corpse aimed to fix you, and make it look like you was killed in a dynamite blast you set off yourself . . . Now help me! I'm burning alive."

"Stop it," Seel snapped. "You'll get help—if you'll behave, an' go along to Sheriff Clint with Pap. Your testimony is about all we need now."

"I'll go. But you don't need to think Welke will stop a rustling system that's making us rich. He—"

"By sunup in the mornin', Kate, telegraph wires will have sung the news to men in a half dozen States. They'll move in on ever' ranch along the chain. They followed a trail of Texas fever, Kate. An' Welke an' his men will have lead fever before this is done.

"Pap, you roll Kate around in the water, rope her in her saddle, an' head her in to Sheriff Clint. Then send wires to them places I told you about. Just say: 'Texas ticks,' an' that's all. Those men'll know what it means—an' goodbye to them along the tick trail. Yeah, Texas ticks." Seel chuckled dryly.

He helped Naida mount and rode with his knee touching hers. Behind them, they heard Pap cussing. "Wiggle your hocks in thet water while I dab a half-hitch on your horns," they heard him bawl. Seel chuckled. Naida said:

"You—yu, you didn't want to help her when she was burned."

"Why no, honey. I sure never did. There's only one little lady that gets salve from me." He reached over, dragged her from the saddle, held her on his lap.

"Salve, indeed, Mister Seel!" she tried to sound angry.

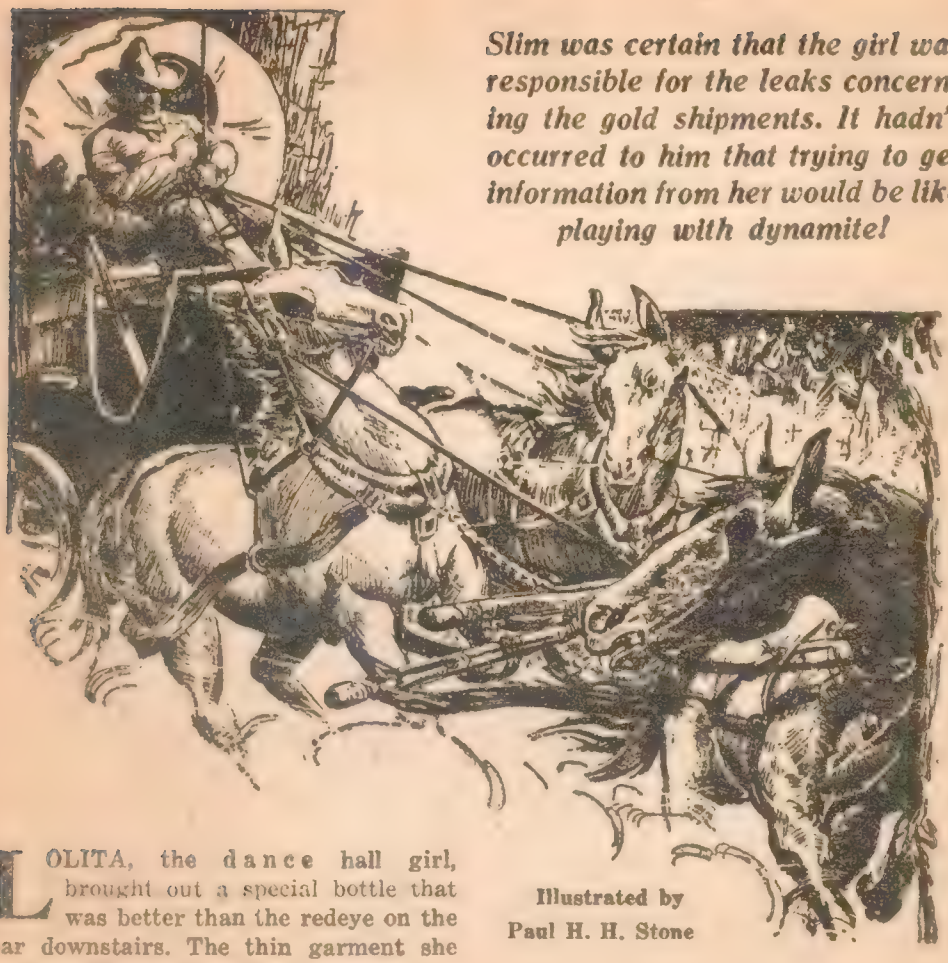
"Well, it ain't really salve. It's the truth, when I orate—"

Oklahoma men were coming up the trail, and this Oklahoma man was glad he'd come on ahead. He could not find it in his heart to hate even a fever spreading Texas tick right now.

"Texas ticks," he muttered. "An' a ranny from Oklahoma ticks, too. I'd just like to see somebody try to stop my clock."

SIX-GUN WESTERN

For many decades the six-gun was law in the vast open spaces west of the Mississippi and from Canada to Mexico. Those were the dramatic great days when men conquered nature and myriad breeds of human renegades with sheer raw courage—and their guns! SIX-GUN WESTERN MAGAZINE is a thrill-packed bargain whose contents are written by authors who really know the West, and the illustrations are by artists who picture its scenes as they really were!



Slim was certain that the girl was responsible for the leaks concerning the gold shipments. It hadn't occurred to him that trying to get information from her would be like playing with dynamite!

Illustrated by
Paul H. H. Stone

LOLITA, the dance hall girl, brought out a special bottle that was better than the redeye on the bar downstairs. The thin garment she had donned flared with her movements.

"Slim" McCann's eyes were half closed and he muttered thickly. He wasn't nearly as drunk as he seemed and he was watching Lolita's liquid, sloe-black eyes. Occasionally he glanced at her and his spine tingled in spite of himself. He was sprawled on the sofa in the room that made him sick with its musky smell of cheap perfume.

When she had downed her own drink, Lolita came over and sank down beside him. She slid a small, warm hand to the back of his neck. Her nearness stirred him and made him nervous.

He judged that Bart Owner must have felt the same way. And Hodge Hopkins. They had been freight skinners on the Devil's Tail the same as Slim McCann. Both now were dead in the whirling waters of the Devil's Tail river. They had been with this Lolita shortly before their freight wagons had started down from Snag Mountain to Stubtown with consignments of gold from the rich Big Basin stamp mill.

Slim had learned that much, and he wasn't honing to join them in the Devil's Tail. But he had sworn to himself that he would get at the hombre behind the murderous holdups of the wagons carrying the gold. "Wolf" Callow's owlhooters pulled the jobs, but Wolf Callow had not the brains to do more than stage occasional raids on the cow ranges. And Wolf Callow had struck only at the freight wagons carrying the gold, although the consignments were loaded secretly and at odd times.

So, behind Wolf Callow and the girl Lolita there had to be a keener mind.

TABLE STAKES

By MAX NEILSON

To save the girl, he threw all his weight on the reins and brakes, fully expecting to go over the cliff.

Roaring Stubtown had many such minds, but the murders of Owner and Hopkins went back to Lolita. Slim downed his drink and mumbled sleepily, letting his arms go at last about the girl.

"You like Lolita veree much?" she crooned softly into his ear.

"Like Lolita?" he said with drunken gravity. "You betcha! I ain't never seen a filly that could beat yuh for looks."

"You kees Lolita then!" she said breathlessly, both her arms suddenly locking his neck. Slim hadn't meant it to be quite this way, but nature made Slim forget his purpose for the moment.

He couldn't then for a time keep in mind that this was the way it must have been with the two dead freighters.

WHEN the girl stood up, sighing and breathless, and poured him another drink, Slim McCann hated himself. She was beside him again. Then it came.

"Slim ees love Lolita much?" she murmured, dark eyes heavy-lidded. "Maybe eet ees he would take Lolita away. Next time when the gold ees come down in Slim's wagon? Yes?"

Slim's lean body tensed. Thus far he had read sign rightly on the freight murder trail.

"Well, mebbe so," he grunted thickly. "Reckon yuh could git ready by then for the long trail?"

Lolita's eyes sparkled with triumph. This drunken freight skinner was about to give up the information she was after.

"When ees eet the next gold ees come?" she said.

"Lemme see," considered Slim. "Next time on my wagon a week come Thursday."

He reached for the special bottle, but Lolita's arms had locked him tightly.

"Slim ees maybe love Lolita?"

"Um-m-m-m!" he grunted with her vibrant lips pressing his mouth.

And from the bedlam of the barroom and dance floor below came a cry that cleared all the fog from Slim's senses.

"Lemme go! I tell you I must find Slim McCann!"

"Up them stairs, ma'am!" obliged a heavy voice in sudden silence over the barroom. "First door t' your right, but I reckon yuh'd best not—"

Slim was freeing Lolita's arms, wrenching her away from him. Resisting, the girl tripped, toppled backward and she screamed.

Slim recalled too late that the flimsy door had no lock. There were quick steps and the door flew open. A willowy girl with bits of the sky for eyes and coiled yellow hair swayed in the opening. Her pretty oval face was white, then it slowly flushed to scarlet as she took in the sprawled figure of Lolita on the floor and coatless Slim McCann. Slim's belted .45 hung over the back of a chair.

"You? Slim McCann!" The words came with a lash of scorn in the tense voice of the girl. "And they told me that maybe you could help me!"

Lolita rose slowly to her feet. Her black eyes flashed and her hand darted to her garter. A sharp jeweled dagger appeared and Lolita emitted a hissing scream as she sprang at the girl in the doorway.

"Stop it, you damn' fool!" grated Slim, moving with a lithe quickness that carried him to the two girls.

HE HAD no time to attempt to seize the mad girl's knife hand. The best he could do was make it a straight punch with his fist to the soft flesh under her ear. Lolita cried out and crumpled.

The girl in the doorway hadn't moved.

"Maybe I ought to thank you, Slim McCann!" she said scathingly. "But I don't feel that way!" Then her voice broke into a sob.

"And while you've been here pleasurin' yourself, Daddy Dorn's freight wagon is in the Devil's Tail! Wolf Callow got him and the mules went off the cliff! Shorty Masters was with him and he got away! But I can't expect anything from you now, Slim McCann!"

She turned, starting to run down the stairs into the barroom. At the top she tripped and a bearded hombre, much the worse for redeye, caught her in his huge arms at the bottom.

But instead of releasing her, he cursed jubilantly into the silence that had fallen.

"Damme t'hell! Who'd ever expect to see such a pretty critter in the Black Jack? An' she jumps right inter my arms!"

Mary Dorn's corn yellow hair tumbled from its coiled knot into a lustrous mass over her shoulders. She didn't speak or cry out, but clawed furiously at the bearded face of the tough. He roared with ribald laughter.

"Let 'er go, yuh damn' polecat!" roared Slim McCann as he hurled himself from the stairs above, not waiting for his gun.

Slim's hard, lean weight struck the tough with an impact that carried both

him and Mary Dorn to the muddied floor.

The collision knocked the breath from Slim, but it didn't prevent him crossing a hard right to his opponent's chin as they lay on the floor. The tough swore heavily, rolled over, and his gun came from its holster. Unarmed, Slim stared into the round hole of death, almost feeling the lead cutting into his innards.

A smaller calibred gun exploded. The tough's .45 belched fire, too, but the bullet went wild. The tough fell to his back, dead enough, with one eye gone where a slug had hit his temple.

A hoarse mutter of surprise went around the room.

Slim got Mary to her feet. He was looking at "Diamond" Reagan, the thin, dark-faced gambler who ran the games for the Black Jack. Reagan was pushing his .38 back into his shoulder holster without any trace of emotion.

"Reckon I owe yuh one for that," muttered Slim. "Come on, Mary, let's get out."

THERE were two score tough hombres looking on. "Pinky" Duval, who owned the Black Jack, blinked small eyes over his fat, pinkish cheeks. He was nodding approval with a smile for Reagan.

"A lady's a lady, even in the Black Jack," Duval said with a short laugh. "The drinks are on the house."

Slim got Mary through the batwing doors. He took her arm as they crossed the muddy street between the plank walks. Then she freed herself.

"I'll go on alone from here, Slim McCann, if you please," she said. "Reckon you may want-a-go-back."

Slim had often watched Mary Dorn, but had never before said more than "howdy" to her. Her eyes still scorned him for what she had seen in Lolita's room. Her red lips were drawn into a thin line.

"Mebbe so I'd best go back," Slim said quietly. "But not for the reason you're thinkin' on. It's too late to save Dad Dorn."

He had too much stiffness of pride to tell her why he had been in Lolita's room. That could wait until he succeeded or failed in uncovering the hombre behind Wolf Callow's murderous holdups.

"You're as much of a beast as the rest of them!" flared Mary angrily. "It ain't too late to get Wolf Callow!"

She turned and ran along the plank walk. Slim knew suddenly that Mary Dorn was the only girl he would ever love. Her scorn had made him feel sick and empty bellied, something that never before had happened to Slim.

When he got back to the batwings, several girls were quitting for the night and crossing over to the boarding house where they lived. Lolita was not with them.

He saw Lolita over the batwings. She was talking with the gambler, Diamond Reagan and with Pinky Duval. They were at the back end of the bar. Surveying all of the hombres in the Black Jack, it struck Slim that the Black Jack was the meeting place of all the owlhooters and gunnies infesting the newly opened Devil's Tail country.

There was not a single law-abiding citizen of Stubtown in the place. There wasn't a doubt in his mind now but that all of the crimes of rustling and raiding in the new Devil's Tail range and gold country were brewed right here.

Even if Lolita hadn't pointed to a yellowed calendar hanging on the wall, Slim could readily have guessed that she was imparting to Reagan and Duval the information she had wormed out of him about the next time his freight wagon would be toting gold from Snag Mountain. Duval was nodding and smiling.

"So that's why Reagan was so damn' handy with that snipe gun o' his," muttered Slim. "If I'd have got lead poisoned, then I wouldn't be bringin' down the gold like I told Lolita."

He swung his lean length through the batwings and went back to Lolita's room for his gun.

"You need a drink, McCann," offered Pinky Duval as he came back down the stairs.

"Mebbe so you're right," muttered Slim. "I'm right sorry I had t' hit yuh, Lolita," he told the inky-eyed girl, who was standing with Duval and Reagan.

"Eet ees, what you say, hunkee dorree," the girl smiled at him. Her look said she was the brand of female critter that would go for an hombre who beat his woman.

Slim saw Marshal Nathan sprawled drunkenly in a chair. He was all the law there was in Stubtown or in the Devil's Tail country. He didn't amount to the hoot of an owl because he always started drinking before breakfast, Pinky Duval supplying the redeye.

Slim downed his drink and thanked Diamond Reagan again for saving his life. The gambler killer smiled thinly and said, "I'd have gunned him for that girl, Mary Dorn, anyway."

Slim had another drink and went out. He could feel the eyes of the two men and Lolita on his back. He was convinced now that Reagan and Duval were the brains behind the gold holdups on the Devil's Tail freight trail. And it was a toss up whether Wolf Callow's killers would be waiting for his wagon at the top of the narrow canyon trail a week from the coming Thursday.

There was moonlight and Slim could see the snake-like wagon trail where it had been zigzagged up the five hundred foot bluff behind the Black Jack saloon. The saloon was built against the cliff directly under it.

SLIM McCANN'S high-wheeled Concord freighter creaked up the narrow trail toward the top of the grade coming from Snag Mountain. Slim rested the mules before reaching the summit where the road dipped steeply on the curving incline toward Stubtown.

"If Wolf Callow's ridin', reckon he'll be waitin' below the top o' the grade like he did with them others," said Slim, talking to the mules.

For it was up here that Owner and Hopkins and Dad Dorn had gone to their death in the Devil's Tail river. The black waters of the river boiled and churned through the canyon nearly a thousand feet below. The wagon trail here was a powder-blasted shelf, barely more than the breadth of the wagon. There were cuts in the wall every mile or so for passing.

Except for occasional splits in the rock, the canyon wall rose sheer above the road another thousand feet. A few hard horse trails broke through the wall at intervals, and it was over these that Wolf Callow and his outlaws rode to some hideout back in the Malpais of the mesa at the top of the mountain.

It was late afternoon, and it was the Thursday on which Slim had drunkenly confided to Lolita he would be bringing down gold from Snag Mountain. He was not toting gold, and the Big Basin stamp mills would ship no more until help had been sent by the U. S. marshal at Butte to clean out the holdup killers.

Slim hadn't intended to be carrying gold, anyway. But his wagon was heavily loaded, although the freighters usually came back light after taking in supplies to the mining town of Big Basin. Slim had seen to that, and he was smiling grimly as the mules rested and he looked down into the oily, roiled blackness of the Devil's Tail river.

"Reckon Mary Dorn has me branded by this time as the lowest kind of a varmint," he said. "It's a helluva country where you can't stir up enough law or honest citizens to get a posse out after Dad Dorn's gulchers."

Mary Dorn had tried to arouse what few good citizens there were in the boom camp of Stubtown. They were too far outnumbered by the tougher element and too weak-spined to risk lead in their briskets for the girl of the murdered old freighter.

She hadn't appealed to Slim McCann again, and he was glad of that. For he had his own plan worked out. Now he had one .45 holstered and another one lying on the seat beside him.

THE four mules quit heaving and Slim freed the brake lock. His steel-gray eyes swept the rifts in the upper

canyon wall, seeking the gleam of metal or movement that would tell him he was being watched. He saw neither. But suddenly a startled blue jay flew out at the top of the grade just ahead, squawking with anger.

"Company ahead, yuh jennies," muttered Slim to the mules. "Here's wishin' yuh luck an' hopin' you an' me all come through without punctured hides."

He clucked and the loaded wagon creaked heavily up the last hundred yards of the grade to the summit. Slim's broad mouth became a tightly slashed line. He made sure the six-gun was in its place on the seat.

Both his feet were set behind the high dashboard, and they were resting on sheet metal plates put in place before he had rolled from Big Basin. They afforded good protection for him as long as the wagon would stay on the narrow trail.

He judged Wolf Callow and his owlhooters would be blocking the trail just below the summit where the road wound sharply around a shoulder of the wall. For it was at this shoulder, some two hundred yards below the summit that the other freight wagons had been held up, then dumped into the Devil's Tail.

The pitch over the summit was just ahead.

The cracking report of a rifle rang out, echoing from the canyon walls. It was beyond the summit. A man's voice cried out sharply as though he had been hit and the rifle exploded again.

"Git up!" snapped Slim at the mules, swinging the long whip with a snap that joined a second echoing rifle shot.

Because of the creak and groan of the wagon, Slim could hear nothing now but the dying echoes of two rifle shots. The four-mule team topped the summit. Ahead half a dozen hard, slouch-hatted hombres were trying to control horses apparently spooked by the shooting.

Slim was sure there were other riders out of sight beyond the rock shoulder. Then he saw Wolf Callow, a squat figure more like a huge toad in the saddle than the Wolf he was called.

Slim slowed at the summit, setting the brake partly, his one hand gathering the reins and his other seeking the six-gun on the seat. He clucked at the mules, freed the brake, taking in the line of mounted owlhooters squarely across the narrow road.

"Hold 'er, McCann!" rang out Wolf Callow's command. "Yuh git yore paws up, an' brake 'er down or yuh git a bellyful o' lead!"

"Yeah!" yelled Slim. "An' the Devil's Tail gets a bellyful o' skunks this time!"

He let out a yipping shout at the mules and dropped below the level of the high dash, peering over. The full weight of the heavy wagon jammed down upon the heels of the wheel team and the tongue rammed the doubletrees of the lead mules.

"Look out!" shouted Wolf Callow. "Plug them lead mules! The damn' fool's goin' to try ridin' it out!"

The mules broke into a gallop, then the wagon was pushing them into a run. Slim sawed the reins with one hand, holding them to the narrow trail.

"Ten seconds an' it'll be over one way or t'other!" he grated between set teeth as the sort guns of the owlhooters started cracking. Lead thudded into the dashboard, zinged into the metal. The four mules were on the dead run now. The nigh leader stumbled and staggered as a bullet nipped him, but he was carried ahead and kept his feet.

A flattened bullet glanced and struck Slim's jawbone and seemed to tear off the side of his face. But his unexpected defiance and the thunder of the heavy freighter wagon stopped the shooting temporarily.

"Git 'hind the shoulder!" yelled Wolf. "He cain't make the turn! Damn' 'im, he'll go over with the gold!"

CLEAR of the gun menace for a few seconds, Slim fought off dizziness from his face wound and laid his weight on the reins. There was no stopping the crowded mules quickly, with the wagon jamming upon them, but Slim got a hard foot on the brake.

He had figured on that shoulder turn and he had doubled the leverage of the holding shoes against the wheels. The big, canvas-topped wagon swung as the wheels locked, sliding, and was within inches of the edge of the drop into the Devil's Tail. Slim threw all of his weight into holding the leaders close to the wall.

"Damn' 'em!" he spat out through the blood in his mouth. "Lemme make that swing, an I'll roll 'em over the rocks or chase 'em the hell into Stubtown!"

The mules veered to sawing reins and plunged ahead. The tipping wagon grated its steel tires as it slid, then it was around the shoulder and headed into a straightaway down grade. A feeling of grim exultation swept through Slim.

There were a dozen bunched owlhooters on their horses ahead. Undoubtedly they expected to see the wagon plunge into the Devil's Tail on that turn. And Slim had a gun in one hand and was thumbing it, adding its bullets to the death menace of the big wagon roaring down upon the outlaws.

One bearded owlhooter threw up his hands, his horse reared, then both man and horse went rolling into a thousand feet of space above the churning, black river.

"Turn, yuh skunks, an' run for it!" yelled Slim, starting to drop again for the protection of his metaled dash as lead once more whizzed over the mules.

Then, "Great heavens!" groaned Slim, rearing up and putting all his weight upon the reins and brake.

Wolf Callow had turned his men to run for it ahead of the runaway wagon, but there were two figures that could not escape hoofs of the mules and the wild wheels of the freighter. One of these was an owlhooter, whose doubled body proved he was past being harmed.

The other was Mary Dorn, lying limply in the middle of the trail, her yellow hair streaming and her white face toward the oncoming death. Like a flash, the answer as to how she had come there jumped through Slim's brain.

Those rifle shots and the dead outlaw told him. The girl of Dad Dorn must have set out alone to avenge her father's murder. That could be the only answer to the rifle shots Slim had heard.

As this hit his brain, with the sight of Mary, the girl moved, arose partly, lifting herself on her hand, staring at the mules plunging upon her. Slim's next split second of action was automatic. He fully expected to go into the Devil's Tail with his wagon, doing what he did.

The brake wheels screamed, Slim's full, desperate strength on the reins fairly hurled the nigh lead mule into the inner wall. He had sick emptiness inside as the big wagon slewed and swung partly around. He was sure the rear wheels would go over the edge and drag the mules with it. He started to throw himself from the seat as the nigh leader hit the wall, fell and tangled the feet of the wheel horse behind him.

Through the dedlam of sound made by the scream of the down mule and the sliding wagon, Slim heard Wolf Callow's hard rasping voice.

"Got 'im, by hell! Knowed he wouldn't run down that killin', hellcat gal!"

SLIM had a vague glimpse of Mary Dorn staggering to her feet now, her hands reaching as if she were trying to hold the big wagon on the trail. She was in riding breeches, but her wool skirt had been torn.

In the space of less than three seconds while his life hung in the balance, it was strange how clearly Slim could see and mark everything. Mary standing there with her bared white arms and shoulders, her tumbling yellow hair, and her slender body.

Then Slim plunged from the wagon seat, landed on the hard rock of the trail and his head seemed to explode into a galaxy of stars. That was all he knew for perhaps many minutes. He didn't know as voices murmured then grew louder in his awakening ears that the blood from his face wound and his crooked position led Wolf Callow and his owlhooters to believe him too dead to be worth the wasting of a bullet.

"Yuh take the gal back t' the hideout!" floated the voice of Wolf Callow. "When I git back from Stubtown t'night, I'm lookin' after her personal!"

Slim's muscles failed to respond to the most desperate effort of his will. He could open his eyes only with an effort. One bearded owlhooter was pulling Mary across the horn of his saddle. She cried out with pain and rage, clawing at his face. The owlhooter laughed raucously and his flat hand struck the girl's head at one side.

Although he couldn't speak, Slim cursed inwardly. The blow stunned Mary, and she drooped as lifelessly as an empty sack. Other owlhooters were swearing because there was no gold in the freight wagon. Slim saw the big wagon had stayed on the trail, the lead mules were down and the wheel animals were standing, shivering in a tangle of torn harness.

All of his desperate effort failed to bring Slim out of his semi-coma. Even the thought of what would happen to Mary Dorn in the hands of the toadlike Wolf Callow could not overcome the fog in his brain. The fog thickened and he lost consciousness again.

Because of that, Slim did not hear Wolf Callow make a sudden change of plans concerning Mary.

The sun had been low in the West over the Devil's Tail when Slim's senses deserted him the second time. He awoke in the chill of the late night in the high mountains. Except for the movement of animals nearby, there was silence on the wagon trail.

Slim discovered he could move slowly. One wheel mule was lying down and the other was still standing, both trapped by their harness and the bodies of the other mules.

He saw by the stars it was after midnight. His first thought was again of Mary and Wolf Callow's promised personal attention on his return from Stubtown. There was no possibility of finding the outlaw hideout in the bewildering mazes of the Malpais running back from the mountain mesa.

Slim uttered low oaths. "If Wolf Callow has harmed her, I'll find 'im an' drag 'im to death at the heels of a bronc. But how—?"

It struck him then how he might discover Wolf's hideout, although it might be too late to save Mary from his brutal hands.

"Diamond Reagan! Pinky Duval! That girl Lolita!"

He repeated their names with the slowness of deadly intent, although he knew that in Stubtown he would be but one wounded and weakened hombre against Reagan and Duval, and their many gunnie cohorts.

His strength returned as he moved. He found one of his guns and reloaded it. Next he tackled the tangle of harness about the mules. Dropping the front traces, he got the live team hooked up and in perhaps half an hour the big wagon was moving slowly down the grade on a half set brake toward Stubtown.

SLIM McCANN sat in the wagon seat and watched the front lights go out at the Black Jack saloon. He had stopped on the snake curve trail directly above the saloon building, a distance of about two hundred feet above the roof.

The dancing girls had trooped over to their boarding house. The last of the night's patrons seemed to have left the place, and it was four o'clock in the morning by Slim's big silver watch.

He was sick and shaken, but the feel of his gun warmed him some. Climbing stiffly to the ground, he tied the mule team and eased himself down the trail. When he reached the town level, light showed from the shades of a window at the rear of the Black Jack.

"By all hell, either Pinky Duval or Diamond Reagan will talk!" he said between tight lips. "Once I've got the drop, I'll kill one an' I reckon that'll loosen the other skunk's tongue!"

He judged that Reagan and Duval would be alone in that rear room counting up the day's dinero from the bar and the games. He was convinced they knew

where Wolf Callow's hideout lay in the badlands.

The window showed a space of glass beside the shade. Slim catfooted toward it. Then he was swearing bitterly to himself.

Diamond Regan was there, also Pinky Duval. So was Wolf Callow, and Slim breathed a little easier over that. But he counted nine other gunnies, four of whom he guessed to be Wolf Callow's outlaws who had come with him.

Three games of poker were being played. And table stakes were some of the bar gold looted from freight wagons when Okner, Hopkins and Dad Dorn had been murdered.

Slim was cursing his own helplessness against such odds. One hombre with one gun against twelve, most of whom wore a pair of .45s. It was hopeless. He might gun down two or even more, but he was not so sure of even that. It would bring him no nearer to what he sought, to knowledge of the place where Mary had been taken.

Slim's brain never worked faster. He could not count on any of the weak-spined Stubtown folks. Shorty Masters was up in Big Basin. Slim was thinking hard when his gaze went up to the white canvas top of the big freight wagon on the trail above.

Ten minutes later, Slim had reached the wagon again.

In another ten minutes he had backed the wagon to a sloping spot where its rear wheels rested on the edge of the bluff directly above the roof of the Black Jack saloon. Slim set the brake hard enough to hold, then got the wooden block he used for chunking the wheels sometimes to rest his mules on steep grades.

He placed the chunk solidly behind one wheel, then he brought four lass ropes he had in the wagon and tied them together. Looping one end around the chunk, he dropped the other, making sure that it reached the ground close beside the Black Jack.

He unhitched the mules and tied them up. Then he carefully freed the set brake. The weight of the wagon rested upon the blocking chunk.

Slim talked to himself in clipped words.

"It'll smash the hell an' all outta most of them varmints, but it's bound to leave one or two kickin' long enough to talk—"

Minutes later he was again creeping toward the saloon window. He held the end of the lass rope.

SLIM McCANN never had gone in for killing. He wasn't a gunnie. He was a freight skinner, but at this moment he was filled with an almost insane desire to avenge the murdered freighters and wipe out the heads of the owlhooters who had taken Mary Dorn.

Heaven only knew what had happened to Mary, even if Wolf Callow had not returned to his camp to attend to her personally.

Slim crept close and peered through the window. Only one man had left the backroom. Diamond Reagan was nowhere to be seen. It was too late to worry about that now. He might still be in the building.

"An' if he ain't I'll get him individual afterward!" he promised himself.

By this time Slim's strength had almost petered out. His face wound had bled a great deal and his head bore a bump the size of an egg. He could feel the haze in his brain that had preceded his second attack of unconsciousness. So he moved to put all of his weight on the rope attached to the block chunking the freight wagon two hundred feet above.

As he did, he saw Pinky Duval nod to Wolf Callow and grin. Wolf's ugly face matched the grin with one of his own that had nothing but evil in it, if Slim had been clear headed enough to grasp their meaning. They were looking toward a door at one side of the back room.

"Grin, damn yuh!" said Slim hoarsely, and threw all of his strength onto the rope.

He felt the give of the rope when the chunk pulled loose from under the wagon wheel. The chunk itself came hurtling

down. The big white-topped wagon moved more slowly, rolling back, beginning to topple.

And just before its two tons of weight with the load plunged into space, a scream of desperate appeal rang out inside the saloon. Slim's heart chilled and although in five seconds he believed the back room of the Black Jack would be a shambles, he dived toward the window.

"No, No! Not that! For heaven's sake—"

The door of the side room had burst open. Mary Dorn darted into the back room, her legs flashing white with each frantic stride. And over her shoulder appeared the dark face of Diamond Reagan.

The gambler's teeth were bared as if he were some animal. His gripping hand yanked the girl back into the side room. A hand clamped over her mouth. Pinky Duval and the owlhooters of Wolf Callow laughed raucously, their thick lips working.

The wheel block smashed first onto the sheet iron roof of the Black Jack with a ringing bounce. The crash brought Pinky Duval and Wolf Callow to their feet.

"What the hell an' all was that!" shouted Wolf.

Slim, powerless to move, his spine turned to water, saw the big freight wagon turn completely over once in the seconds it took to fall two hundred feet.

"Heaven help 'er!" he groaned in bitter despair.

THE wagon struck the flimsy building with its sheet iron roof with all the force of exploding dynamite. Roof and walls crumpled inward, and upon the dying of the terrific crash came the screams of dying men. The full weight of the wagon had obliterated the back room rendezvous of the Diamond Reagan and Pinky Duval gang of murdering gunmen.

The bulge of the wall struck Slim and hurled him from his feet, but he was up again. Up and climbing madly into the building wreckage. If only that side room had been farther away? He could hear two or three pinned down men groaning, and one was screaming.

But of the eleven in that back room, all of the others had been in the spot where the wagon itself plummeted through. They were as dead as the three freighters murdered in the Devil's Tail.

Splintered planks blocked Slim's way to the side room, and he tore at them until his fingers were bleeding, but he could hear no sign. It was coming daylight now and there was faint gray light replacing the smashed oil lamps.

He saw her at last, the whiteness of her standing out against the splintered black and brown boards. She was on her knees, painfully extricating herself from a tangle of planks that had been upheld by a cross beam.

Slim called out, "Mary! Mary!"

Her voice replied with awe:

"Slim McCann! You're alive!"

He did not see Diamond Reagan. There was that in Mary's voice as she spoke that sent him toward her. But she suddenly cried out, "Slim! Look out! Behind you!"

Slim got only half turned before slender, strong fingers clamped his throat.

"You think you've won, but you won't live to brag about it," said the deadly quiet voice of Diamond Reagan. "They'll find you here with the others.

Slim's weakness was still upon him. He lashed out with a fist, but the blow glanced harmlessly from Reagan's jaw. The gambler gave a short, hard laugh and Slim's gullet constricted until blinding pain shot in his head.

Mary was trying to reach them, catching up a piece of broken board as a weapon. It was no time for ethics. Slim put all his remaining strength into the driving of one knee upward.

Reagan's fingers relaxed and a groan was forced from him.

"Why, damn you—"

Slim saw the fingers that left his throat dive for that deadly .38 in Reagan's shoulder holster. He managed to

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SADDLE-BUM

From behind the slight screen of trees, Freck watched four riders sweeping a hole in the night.

FRECK GILMORE looked the typical saddle tramp as he drew rein in front of the Five Spot ranch house. His Levis were faded and threadbare. His boots were cheap, run-over ones cast off by a nester. His holster and the loops in his cartridge belt were empty. His saddle was a weather-curled hull, his mount a crowbait pony so poor that its ribs could be counted from a distance. Tufts of rust-colored hair escaped through holes in the wreck of a hat.

CYCLONE

By CLARK HOLM

Original horse and saddle, gun, boots, spurs; even cartridges had gone for food during a long period of unemployment.

The Big Bend ranch on which the kid had been brought up, had sold to a syndicate, and Freck had been told to drift. He had decided to head westward. Ranches all along the way had refused him work, saying that he was too young, too thin. What they did not know was that seventeen-year-old Freck Gilmore was an expert with both rope and six-gun, and that the kid was a very fine rider.

A man came to the door in answer to Freck's knock. "Howdy, stranger," spoke Freck. "I thought maybe I might get put up for the night."

The man, a tall, slab-bodied hombre, peered at him, and then looked at the

Illustrated by Frank Volp

Freck Gilmore looked like a mild case indeed to those hard boys of the Five Spot spread. But when the younker discovered among them the pitiless killers who had murdered his dad, and now were eager for his blood as well, the fire in his make-up came blazing out!

mount. "Saddlebum, huh?" The voice was harsh, contemptuous.

Freck's thin face went hot. The kid was proud. "I'm willing to pay," he blurted curtly, although he had but a dollar to his name.

"Oh, you are, huh? Well, come on in; we're just eating."

"I'd like to put up my pony first, if you don't mind. I—"

"Didn't I say we're eating? About finished, in fact. Think we want to leave grub-pile spread just for you? Let that stack of hide and bones wait. I reckon it won't collapse while you're away."

Resentment was boiling within the kid, but he told himself that he was in no position to argue or show offense. His gaunt belly was howling for food. And so although he pitied his pony, he clumped indoors.

As Freck entered the messroom, he saw three other men. One was seated at the head of the table, both jaws bulging with food. Two others were just slouching out through a side door. They gave him, curious, sneering glances over their shoulders. The one at the table stared at him coldly.

For some unaccountable reason a vague sense of uneasiness had seized him. The four men all were hard-looking fellows—still, why should he be afraid? He had nothing at all of value.

This anxiety became more pronounced as he ate his supper. The two men, after they had finished eating, kept staring at him, and there was something unfathomable in their boring eyes. They were brothers, he had learned—Cole and Hale Bastern. Cole was the one who had let him into the house. Freck had given them his name.

The harsh-voiced Cole remarked:

"Riding the old grub-lines, huh? How come you honored this here country with your presence, kid?"

Freck's face flushed—it was a decidedly thin face; as speckled as a turkey egg.

"On my way to old man Hen Elton's Bar Forty-four spread. Hope to get me a job there. Elton and my dad were saddle pals, back in their boyhood days."

"Ugh! That so?" exclaimed Hale Bastern. In contrast to his brother, he possessed a twanging voice. "It happens we just sold seven hundred head of fine white-face stockers to the old gent. His boys are driving 'em to the home ranch by way of Desolation Peak and Deadman's Pass."

FRECK became interested. Instantly had leaped into his mind the idea of catching up with the outfit. He began asking questions.

For some strange reason the two men became taciturn, suspicious-acting. They turned personally inquisitive. And now of a sudden that spirit of uneasiness which had seized the youth, became all the more pronounced. He felt exactly as if he had discovered that he had entered a snake-den. And another thing! These two men! Their hard faces seemed familiar! They stirred up sinister ghosts of memory within his mind. Yet he could not recall ever having heard the name, Bastern, before.

Suddenly the slate-eyed Hale shot at him: "Haven't I seen you somewhere, kid?"

Freck gulped a mouthful of boiled beef and potatoes. "Strangely, he felt almost terrified: "N—not that I know of." Both men leaned toward him. Their eyes seemed to be looking straight through him. His nerves began to quiver.

And then of a sudden the freckled youth had it! Ten years ago, in a country far away from this, he had cowered within a shack while two desperados had shot his father to death before his eyes and had cleaned the little ranch of stock. He had learned later that they were the notorious buscaderos, the Acher brothers.

So excited now was Freck that he blurted: "I know you now! Basterns, hell! You're the murdering, thieving Achers!"

Remembrance came to "Cole Bastern" at the same instant: "It's that kid! The one we left in the shack that day down in the border! I told you we ought to've killed him!"

"Well, we can rectify the mistake right now," twanged "Hale Bastern," as he kicked back his chair, jerked to his feet, and dropped his hand to his six-shooter.

Almost subconsciously Freck acted. He ducked. As his tousled, sandy thatch went under the table edge, a gun boomed, its detonation thundering there within the confines of the four walls. He heard the vicious *Ha-ash-h!* of the slug above him.

Freck grabbed a table leg and heaved. Over went the table. So did Cole Bastern. There was a mighty clattering of spilled dishes and pans. Then came a terrific bawl, like that of a wounded steer.

Freck grinned in the darkness—the lamp had gone out. He grabbed up a chair and hurled it toward the place in the gloom where he knew Hale was standing, gun ready to send another slug. Gone now was the cold fear of a moment before. He laughed outright as he heard a thud, and Hale joined in Cole's wild swearing.

HE WENT bounding for the back door. There was amazing speed and ability in the frail-looking body. Every cord and muscle within that slim form was like rawhide.

As Freck hurled himself through the back door two shots exploded behind him. To the kid in that instant they sounded like the boom of artillery. His worn old nester boots whacked upon the back porch. A hide-bottomed chair he kicked out of the way. It skittered crazily, and brought up against a post. He spun around a corn of the plank building and went sprinting desperately for his pony.

Now the whole ranch was in an uproar. The horses within the corral were snorting and galloping about. Awakened chickens were cackling. A leashed dog was barking and snarling. Within the kitchen there was a mad furore of stamping feet and shouting voices. Yelling men were breaking out of the bunkhouse.

"Don't let him get away!" brayed the peculiar voice of Hale Bastern. "Riddle him, men! The kid, I mean! Get him!" Colts popped. Hot lead hissed about the fleeing youth.

Freck Gilmore mumbled an exclamation of thankfulness as he reached his mount. A lunge, and his hands gripped the saddle horn. He flung his wiry body. Down came his spidery legs and clamped like steel springs. "Git, Billy!" he yelled, as he struck with his unspurred heels, and an open hand. The tired, ribby little horse responded to the best of its ability.

The crackling of guns became like a Fourth of July celebration. To the low-lying, desperately riding kid it seemed that lead was swarming about him. He was audibly mumbling hopes—and Fate granted his wish. Neither he nor his horse was touched. Soon the shooting ceased, and he realized that he was out of pistol range.

The Basterns were cursing like wild men—bitterly denouncing the two punchers, when they themselves were more to blame for the kid's escape than the two men from the bunkhouse. "After him!" Cole's voice seemed to jar to the very heavens. "We've *got* to get that kid! Saddle and ride, men! He can't escape us on that nag of his! A month's extra wages to the man who drills the young 'un! I want him dead, not alive!"

There was a keen brain beneath Freck Gilmore's rust-colored thatch. He had bolted away southward. If he maintained a ride in that direction he would be quickly overtaken and shot to death. Now he boldly circled straight back toward the ranch house.

He chuckled grimly as, concealed by a dubious screen of greasewood, he watched four riders sweeping a hole in the night. Quietly, then, he rode to the corral, sprang down, and loosened his lariat.

Freck was not stealing a fresh mount. He would release the animal when he caught up with old man Elton's Bar Forty-four herd, and let the cowpony return home. Soon he was in the saddle again. He looked longingly toward the house: "Maybe I could find a gun there." And then he shook his head: "Nope, I guess I better not risk it. I'd have to make a light, and it might be seen. Reckon I'll depend on this Five Spot cayuse to save my ride."

STEADILY Freck Gilmore rode westward. Although a stranger in that country, he knew the location of Desolation Peak and Deadman's Pass, for he had carefully inquired directions to old Hen Hilton's Bar Forty-four ranch. The night wore on—to the steady thumping of his "borrowed" mount's hoofs.

Three hours past midnight! He looked up at the egg-shaped moon. The sky was dull, the stars sickly. Not a breath of air stirred, but there was a threat of sandstorm in the air.

"A feller can always smell a duster long before she arrives," muttered Freck, as his light-brown eyes anxiously studied the horizons. "It's a sort of—well—metallic smell. And the heavens take on a weird look."

He finally located the Bar Forty-four outfit, and rode into camp just as the punchers were getting ready for grub-pile. The east was faintly pink. The campfire glowed cheerfully beneath the string of Dutch cooking utensils. The wagon loomed a welcome. Freck heard the jingling of a bell, and saw that the wrangler was bringing in the ponies. The herd was up and grazing. Human-figures were moving about in the dawn.

The punchers gazed curiously as Freck rode into camp. They gathered about him, and after he had told his story, brows furrowed worriedly, Spade Manners, boss of the outfit, spoke thoughtfully: "Umph! Me, I'm sorter uneasy. The boss met them Bastern brothers at market point and dealt with them for some shorthorn breeders. We picked up the stuff and headed for home. Figured on venting and rebranding after getting there. Didn't want to delay none, account it had been looking sort of sandstormy, and we had some mean country to cross."

"You better look out for them two hombres," warned Freck. "They're snakes. They may try to get the cows back. With their brand still on 'em, all they'd have to do would be to haze 'em onto the home range, and—"

"Yeh, I was thinking about that. Wish we'd vented and branded before leaving their range. Can't stay halted long enough to do the work right now, though. She's coming a buster of a sandstorm, or I miss my guess, and we want to be out of this dusty country before it breaks."

The dark, wiry foreman thumbed his cleft chin thoughtfully: "Ex-desperadoes and killers, huh? They come to this country some years back, and went to raising blooded stuff. They've always acted sort of mysterious, but—You can fix their clocks by talking to the law," he broke off.

Freck shook his head: "They paid to the law—that is, all that the law could hang onto them. Now they're clear. I reckon my word wouldn't be sufficient to hang 'em for the murder of my dad. I could make things mighty unsociable for 'em in this country, though, even if I can't prove anything against 'em. They know it—and that's why they tried to kill me. If they'd succeeded, nobody would ever have known."

"The rattlers!" growled Spade Manners, and then: "Well, let's get rid of this grub; then we'll start the herd rolling. I'll dig you up a decent outfit, kid."

Shortly after sun-up the outfit was on the move. Freck Gilmore was happier than he had been in many a day, despite what had happened during the night. Spade had supplied him with a Bar Forty-four horse and a decent saddle. The boys had thrown in together, and now his clothes were those of the average range hand. To cap the climax, every loop in his ammunition belt was filled, and a Colt forty-five was swung at his right hip.

Yes, Freck Gilmore was happy. Exhilaration rolled up in him. Here he had been received and treated not as a kid saddle tramp, but as a seasoned cowboy. He felt a bit reckless. He would show them that their confidence in him was not misplaced. He could ride, and rope, and shoot as well as any dad-gummed one of 'em! They'd see!

Little did he know in his new-found happiness how much he was going to need all his abilities. A storm was coming from the north—a storm of dust. Another was coming from the south—a storm of gunsmoke, and lead, and death!

Hale Bastern's six-gun was out. "We can rectify that mistake right now," he twanged.

THE sandstorm approached at mid-morning. No adverse whim of Dame Weather is feared by range-wise riders half so much as a "duster," and here was one at its worst. There was an eerie stillness. The sun was brazen, but not hot. The sky was a dingy red. The atmosphere was pregnant with electricity. Sounds fell peculiarly flat—voices, hoofs, crackling of joints, the *whop* of lariats on rumps.

Eyes kept turning to the north. Over there, from east to west in a long, sombre line, the oncoming storm billowed and roiled in an awful way. Even the marching cow-brutes caught the tension—as their bawls, and their rolling eyes, and their quickened pace manifested.

Spade Manners, his tightly reined, loping mount seeming to float under him, circled the line of cattle. To each puncher that he reached he said: "She's coming, cowboy. Looks like a humdinger, but we've all seen 'em before. Just keep the critters rolling, and everything will be all right."

His quiet, efficient way begot confidence. The punchers grinned, nodded, drawled agreement that there was nothing to worry about. But each man knew that both he and the other lied. Why, the atmosphere fairly quivered with danger!

"You come with me, Freck," Spade curtly directed. "It takes a couple of good men to ride point at a time like this."

Swelling pride almost sent buttons whizzing from the kid's clothes. He pulled his Stetson lower, tightened his reins, fingered his Colt, jingled his spurs: "Sure, Spade, you can depend on me. Let's go."

Even the first puff of the dirt-storm was almost stifling. Men jerked their hats down to their eyebrows, and pulled their scarfs up over their noses. The cattle bawled uneasily, their bellowing drifting

weirdly through the gloomy atmosphere. Tumbleweeds bounded along—phantoms out of nowhere, into nowhere. Wind whistled through scrub growth. Sand created a softly snarling sound as it drifted along the earth.

"This is plumb hell!" mumbled Freck. "A feller can't see twenty yards in front of his face!"

"Don't worry," Spade Manners told him. "I can make Deadman's Pass even by guess. Once on the other side there won't be half so much dust."

On they went, a spectral procession—men and beasts! Blurred shadows moving within a tawny fog. An uncanny sort of gloom lay upon the range. At times the sun could not be seen at all; and even when it was visible, it was but a dirty ball, shedding no light. The surrounding hills had been blotted out. Stunted trees and small growth loomed faintly—ghostly things in the murk.

Grit trickled from lowered hatbrims. Human eyes became red—rimmed slits. The punchers coughed, and sneezed, and swore behind their masks. The cattle ceased to bellow, for they quickly had learned that in so doing they filled their lungs with sand. The horses kept their nostrils rattling. Manes and tails flew in the wind. Yes, the storm had made of day a terrible twilight.

After an hour of boring along through the duster, Spake Manners reined close to Freck and mumbled: "I can't leave point, kid; got to keep digging toward the pass. You turn back; circle the herd and see how the other boys are getting along. Give 'em all words of cheer from me, savvy?"

Freck nodded. Spade slapped him on the back and reined away. Freck wheeled and started back Eastward, skirting a side of the stream of cattle.

BESIDES Spade Manners, and the man who had gone ahead with the chuck wagon, there were three of the Bar Forty-four waddies—one on each flank and one at the drag. After a while a smeared figure appeared in the haze. It took the form of a rider. The man's head was down, his face masked by a bandana. "Hi, Arizona!" shouted the kid, taking note of the clothing and of the tall roan horse. "How's she going?"

The other spoke an unintelligible something, and glanced at the youth sidewise from under the lowered brim of his hat. Freck could see scarcely more than a single slitted eye. He called: "Spade says to just take her easy and don't worry. It ain't much of a ways farther to the pass."

The other nodded, and waved a gauntleted hand confidently. Freck did not notice that when the hand dropped it went to the butt of the rider's six shooter. The young fellow had socked spurs to his mount and was ripping a hole in the drifting grit.

Freck swung wide to get around a thick clump of bushes, and then of a sudden he pulled up short. A hat, driven by the wind, had passed right in front of his pony. To whom did that hat belong? There was supposed to be only one rider on his flank. He turned and went loping in the direction from which the mysterious headgear had come.

His horse snorted and danced to one side. Looking down, Freck saw a human form sprawled upon the ground. He dismounted and bent close. "Arizona!" he exclaimed behind his mask. A quick examination showed that the cowboy's skull was dented at the back. Doubtless he had been clubbed with a six shooter.

Freck rose slowly and peered back in the direction from which he had come. "Arizona!" he muttered again. "Then I wonder who's the hombre I spoke to back there! He had on this waddy's clothes, and was riding his roan! The duds on this body ain't a-tall the things Arizona was wearing when last I saw him!"

Filled with anxiety he straddled leather and rode swiftly toward the tail of the herd. Arriving there he came suddenly upon another spectral figure. This rider, too, was closely masked and hatted. He wore clothing and rode the sorrel horse of a cowboy called Rio, but Freck felt certain that here was not the Bar Forty-four puncher who had been left at the

drag. He pretended not to be suspicious, however.

The kid spoke just a few cheering words. He was cold all the while as he did so. He could see that the other was looking at him from the corners of slitted eyes, and he knew not at what second a hand might dart for a six-gun. His own fingers rested curled on his thigh, close to the butt of his forty-five. Swiftly he rattled off his words; then with a dig of his spurs he sent his mount away into the billowing dust.

Up the other side of the herd he went, making back toward the point. Spade Manners must be warned at once. After a while, though, he again yanked to a stop. Out of the storm had come the sound of a shot, strangely muffled there in the boiling, twisting, drifting dust and sand.

Freck felt certain that the shot had not been fired at him, for he had heard no sound of passing lead. Muttering to himself he plied spurs to his horse and rode on. He swung quickly into a ghostly ticket as he described vague shadows in the gloom—a ground hitched horse; a man, bending over another who lay on the ground. The animate one was stripping the outer clothing from the inert form.

Freck's heart pounded. Horror crawled up and down within his slim body as he sat his mount there admidst the bushes and the dust, wildly turning over the situation in his mind. The Bar Forty-four riders were being attacked and their places taken by other men. These fellows were taking their victims' mounts and clothing, so that if any one not allied with them should come along before they had completed their game, they would not be recognized.

And who were these mysterious riders? Freck did not ponder that question at all. "The Bastern gang, of course," he told himself.

"I got to do something to stop 'em," Freck told himself grimly. "I—" The thought broke off. Another rider suddenly had appeared out of the fogging dust. He joined the one who was on the ground. They talked for a moment; then the one on the horse dismounted. The two of them picked up the inert form and came straight toward Freck with it. The kid gritted an exclamation and dragged out his pistol.

WITH calloused ruthlessness the two outlaws tossed the body into some bushes. Now while the killer dressed himself in the cowboy's things, he and his companion talked. They had to shout in order to be heard, and so their words carried plainly to the kid:

"Well, we're all set now, Cole. Bandy has done taken care of that waddy up front by this time."

"I don't know," replied the harsh voice of Cole Bastern. "He might've heard that shot. Sorry you had to fire it, Hale. Couldn't you get your man without shooting?"

"Nope, when I ordered him to put 'em up he reached for a six-gun instead. I didn't have a chance to club him, so I shot."

"That damn' kid's loose somewhere, too. He was circling the herd, handing out words of cheer. I followed him, aiming to backshoot him, but didn't see the little cuss again. He must've rode hard. Did you see him?"

"Nope."

"Better look out," the other warned after a brief silence. "He might've seen you and that body. I'll go on up to the point and see how things are there. The drag can take care of itself. Soon as the whole crew's out of the way we'll start the cows rolling toward home."

Freck Gilmore did not wait to hear more. Taking advantage of a dense billow of dust he spurred his pony out of the clump of harsh growth, and went drilling into the stifling, blinding grit. "I hope they didn't hear the hoofbeats," he told himself.

Within the vicinity of of the place where he had parted company with Spade Manners he swung to the right. The sandfog had thinned a little, and he could see two horses, standing at the edge of a nest of boulders. He slowed his own mount to a walk and turned toward them. A moment later anixety shocked him as he

recognized one of the horses as the foreman's and saw that both saddles were empty. Perhaps another body was being stripped of its outer clothing.

There was desperate need for fast action on the kid's part, for even now Cole Bastern might be on his way to the point, and Freck knew that if Cole saw him the man would try to kill him. And so Freck again swung into a little clump of dry brush. He flung himself out of leather, and with his six-shooter drawn, went humping swiftly forward.

He worked his way among the boulders, pausing now and then to listen, but he could hear nothing except the sounds created by the wind Then he found himself suddenly right upon two men. One of them was stretched on the ground. His head was bare, and his hair was filled with grit. Blood that was thickened with sand streaked down one temple. It was Spade Manners! The other man was kneeling beside him, removing the foreman's jumper.

Some sense warned the killer of another presence. He jerked up his head. In the narrow opening between the lowered hatbrim and the bandanna mask, the kid saw two slitted, gleaming eyes. The next instant the outlaw was throwing himself aside, and sending a hand toward his gun butt.

TWO GUNS exploded, their reports sounding queerly flat there in the storm. As dull flame jerked from the muzzle of Freck's weapon, gravel flew from the ground halfway between him and his opponent. His slug had found the other man before the fellow could raise his gun to a level. Down went the outlaw on his face, and with arms and legs flung wide he lay there without a move.

Freck went quickly to him. The kid's slim body was tense as he grasped a lax arm and turned the fellow onto his back. He pulled down the mask and looked at the face. Immediately he recognized one of the two men whom he had seen slouching out of the Five Spot messroom. The man was dead.

Freck rose to his feet. The next instant he was voicing a startled cry behind his bandanna, and leaping to one side. There was a tall, slab-built devil of the sandstorm before him! Cole Bastern!

The quick-trigger killer fired as Freck lunged aside. The bullet clipped a wisp of rust-colored hair from a side of the kid's head. Before Cole could trigger another shot, the kid hurled a slug. He saw Cole Bastern's tall form jerk—but then that might have been caused by the push of a gust of wind.

A man-to-man gunfight with a notorious gun-slick! The flying thought fairly made the boy's red hair stand on end. What chance had he? But the pinched his lips together and shot again.

He saw now that his first bullet really had slammed into the murderer's chest. The man had been unable to pull trigger again. His gun fell from his long, bony fingers and vanished into the dust. His tall body was rocking. He strove to keep it erect, but failed. The wind shoved him backward. He struck like a felled pine.

Freck gaped in awe. He had killed two men, one of them a notorious desperado. It was almost inconceivable. He told himself that he must be dreaming.

Then he threw off the feeling. The cloak of youth had fallen away from him. He was very much a man now, a man with a warm gun in his hand, and more grim work to perform. His dad's brutal murder was being avenged.

Hale Bastern would have heard the shots. Doubtless even wow he was on his way to investigate them. Why wait for him? Surprise is one of the shortest trails to victory. Freck thrust the naked gun under a side of his denim jumper to keep sand from blowing into the barrel; then he hunched his slim body and went trudging away into the storm.

Queer feelings were racing through him. His mind seemed foreign. He thought that he heard his name called faintly there in the eerie, sandblasted gloom, but he told himself that his imagination was running wild.

The next moment he was soberly, grimly contemplating his probable meeting with Hale Bastern. In the other two

battles he had been fortunate. He had caught the first killer unawares, while his own gun was drawn. In the second instance he had saved himself by that instinctive lunge aside. What would happen when he met the second gun-slinging Bastern? Having heard the shots Hale probably would be alert as a lobo. What would happen?

THE stream of cattle had vanished into the harsh gloom—marching steadily on of their own accord, toward Deadman's Pass. As if sensing the catastrophe impending, the midday darkness became more sombre. The wind increased in violence. It wailed and shrieked among boulders and snagrocks, and whizzed through thorny growth. The sand kept up that harsh, softly snarling sound as it shifted ceaselessly along the ground.

The dust was almost suffocating. It was coming in gigantic, roiling, smokelike waves. At times Freck Gilmore was racked by coughs. The grit sifted right through his bandanna mask, and his nostrils and his lips were caked with it. His eyeballs ached. It seemed that he was all alone within a weird world, which was wholly without life except for himself.

A rider came lunging out of the flying grit. Freck Gilmore lurched to a stop and his gun flew from beneath his jumper. Before he could spring aside the horse's left shoulder struck him and sent him reeling away. Again he was lucky. The blow saved his life.

Evidently Hale Bastern had been riding with gun bared, for now Freck saw a dull red spurt of flame. The confined report of a six-shooter jarred on his eardrums. A slug of lead whizzed past his head. The horse snorted and reared. "You, eh? Damned little rat!" Hale bawled behind his mask. "I'll—"

Freck fired; but Hale Bastern had swung his mount while the animal was rearing. The bullet struck the horse instead of the man. The pony squealed, pivoted, bucked twice; then its legs crumpled under it. Cole went flying from the saddle, and vanished into the dust. The dying horse sent up a veritable geyser of sand as it lay there floundering and flailing wildly.

The kid might have escaped Hale Bastern by taking flight, but he was not thinking of escape. His thin neck outthrust, slim body humped over his gun, he went running toward the spot where he last had seen the outlaw.

THEY met suddenly, and both jerked to a stop. Guns flew to cover human forms. The two weapons exploded at the same instant. Freck saw a flash of fire that disintegrated instantly and flying sparks; then Stygian gloom snuffed down upon him.

When he awoke his brow and his hair seemed all muddy. He heard voices, recognized Spade Manners and another Bar Forty-four waddy. They grinned at him, helped him to sit up. "How you feeling now?" inquired the foreman, yelling to make his voice heard. He was stoppering a canteen.

"Wh—what you rannies doing here? I —I thought—"

"Lucky day for us three. Harry here was slugged, but soon woke up, and come to look for the rest of us. Found me just as I was coming to. A Five Spotter slugged me, too. We saw you disappearing into the storm and called to you, but you didn't hear. We run after you, but didn't find you in the dust. Then we heard guns banging. A moment later we found you and Hale Bastern here."

Freck Gilmore blinked, and looked at a form stretched out nearby. Spade Manners said: "Yeh, you got him. He only creased you. Quite a day's gunwork, Freck! You knocked off three lead slingers, including two notorious desperadoes. Yeh, some day's work! I don't think anybody's ever going to call you kid again!"

Freck got to his feet. "Spade," he asked dubiously, hopefully, "do you reckon that Mr. Elton will give me a job now?"

Spade whacked him on the back: "Will he! Cowboy, I'll be plumb surprised if he don't put me back to twisting broncs, and make you foreman in my place!"

TINHORN'S SWEETIE

By PAUL HANNA

Whirl threw his hooks into his horse as he saw that proddy range cow going for the girl.

THE GIRL had doped Whirl Arrow's liquor after he'd given the tinhorn gambler an hour to quit Bordertown. Whirl Arrow, a man known along the border as a fighting, drinking, gambling fool, had fallen for the lure of soft eyes and warm flesh.

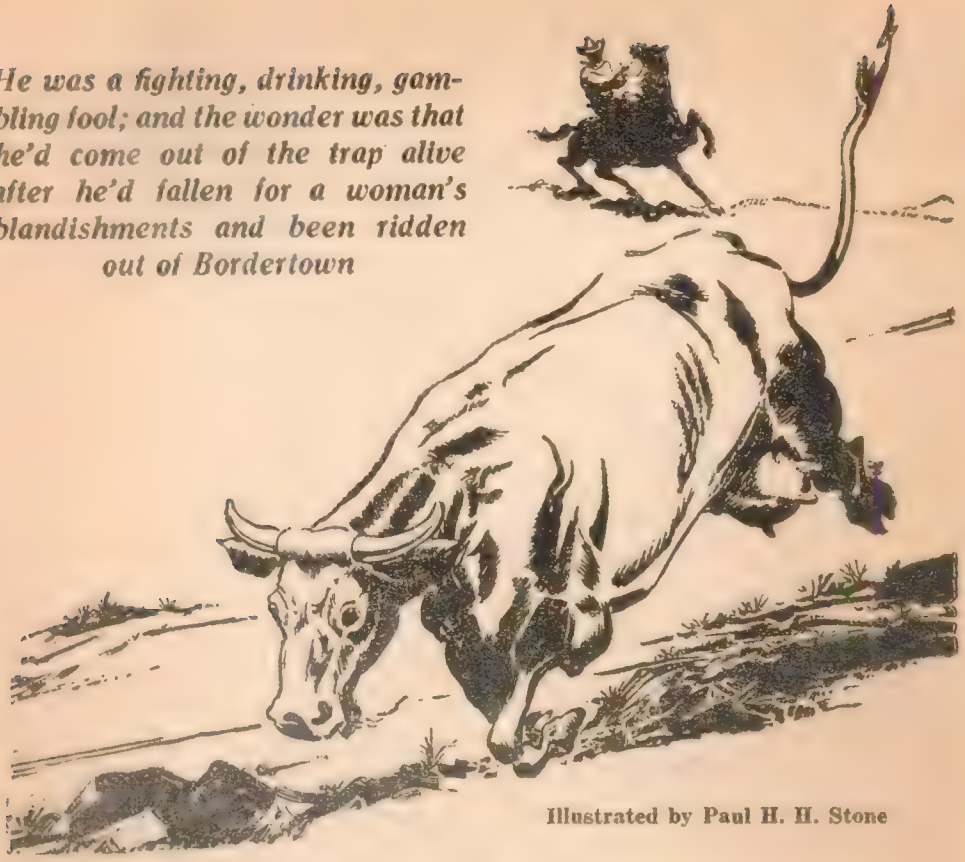
He'd awakened in the brush, miles out of Bordertown, sun torturing his eyes. His horse stood ground-tied nearby and he had his gun. Whirl groaned, was sick, and it took a lot of trembling and sweating before he crawled into his saddle.

The girl was the tinhorn's sweetie! That was it.

"If they figger," Whirl muttered darkly, "this stunt will keep me away from Bordertown, they don't know me atall . . . Or do they, now? They could've kilt me, or left me out here without a mount."

He shook his head and winced. And

He was a fighting, drinking, gambling fool; and the wonder was that he'd come out of the trap alive after he'd fallen for a woman's blandishments and been ridden out of Bordertown



Illustrated by Paul H. H. Stone

as happens to many men, the feeling flooded Whirl: he was sick and tired and through with this wild life and all it meant. And women? Never again!

His thoughts turned to the home he'd left so long ago, and nostalgia was heavy, gnawing his insides. Home! And like a winging bird, Whirl Arrow headed North. Rains and heat, cold, plains and mountains ran out behind him. His nerves and body were ragged and fatigued the day he reached the White Mound Hills and his mount's feet trod old, familiar Bent Arrow range.

"I wonder if the Ol' Man'll forgive me after all this time?" Whirl speculated, thinking of the heated quarrel that had sent him kiting away from these parts.

HE RODE a little rise and skylined there, leaning suddenly in the saddle to stare down the slope beyond. Gaunt cattle grazed the flats below him, and the mounted figure that had taken Whirl's attention, was dismounting close to a small band of them.

Whirl swore softly. She wasn't even dressed for riding, and showed more ignorance by getting afoot like that. She hooked a stirrup over her saddlehorn, then, and it was then Whirl's hooks hit his horse and he was hightailing down the slope.

A proddy range cow, head down and sharp horns ready, was going for the girl.

Whirl yelled as the girl sensed her danger and turned. She screamed sharply and jumped. A horn raked her left leg from knee to thigh, ripping the worn, faded gingham dress she wore. She rolled in the short, brown grass as the cow wheeled to charge upon her once again.

The .45 in the worn holster on Whirl's

right hip glinted dull sunlight and blue-white smoke blossomed on the barrel. The cow broke her lumbering stride, faltered, then dropped as the six-gun roared again.

The girl was struggling to sit up when Whirl reached her. Her small, heart-shaped face was drawn with shock and pain.

"Lie still!" Whirl grunted. "Let's look at this."

She blinked large eyes and obeyed him silently. Whirl pulled at the torn skirt. "Just a bruise," he mumbled, a choke in his voice. "Barely grazed you—"

"Oh!" she cried. Her fingers—Whirl noted how workworn those little fingers were—held the rent together. "You shouldn't," she said in a whisper, not meeting his eyes.

"An' damn' fool girls shouldn't ride out in gingham dresses an' get down afoot near proddy range stock!" he growled. His anger rose abruptly; anger at her because she had made him feel pity and tenderness.

The girl had temper of her own. "I've no riding clothes," she snapped. "I had to tighten my cinch. And," spitefully, "I don't think it was necessary to kill our cow."

"Damn' poor specimen," Whirl grunted, rising and turning to look at the dead animal. "You never see a Bent Arrow beef? Hell! That critter is branded Bent Arrow, an' you called it yours!"

"It is. And you can stop that swearing!" She limped as she got up. "I'm Maia King. If a man named Whirl Arrow doesn't get back here within another month or so, the Bent Arrow comes to my father and my brother Kip and me."

"An' you don't want that," Whirl jeered. "Ain't that just too bad." He removed his dusty sombrero and made a mocking bow. "I'm Whirl Arrow, an' I'm back. I—Say, where's my ol' man?"

"Anse Arrow's been dead more than a year," the girl said with soft composure. "And I don't think it's too bad you're back. Oh, Whirl, I'm glad you are!"

HE SCOWLED. A caustic remark came to his tongue, but he held it in check. Best find out whatever he could before he riled her any more. He merely said, "I'll catch up your horse." Maia King's breath was swifter, her eyes a little dewy as she watched him perform his chore.

As they rode, the girl talked. She said: "We came here from Nebraska. Two years after you'd left home. We went broke when my brother lost our stake in a pok—well, lost it."

"In a poker game," Whirl sneered. "Go on."

"We went to work for your father, then. Conditions got bad, your father was getting old. He died of pneumonia. He willed us the Bent Arrow if you didn't return within a year. If you did, it was up to you to try and build the ranch back up, and I retain half."

"You an' your paw and stakeloosin' brother took advantage of an ol' man, an' you expect me to work like hell to see you on the gravy train again," Whirl snarled. "Well, no woman can run that in on me. No, dammit!" He pounded the saddlehorn with his fist.

"Stop swearing," she admonished. "And lie down and see the Bent Arrow go on to wrack and ruin. That's your style, I imagine. A man who shouts and swears at women—"

"I never swore at you."

"You did!"

"Damnit, I *never*. An' if you think I'm goin' off an' let you have Bent Arrow, you're crazy as a bedbug in a railroad boardin' house!"

The girl turned her head. Although she was very near tears, a smile she didn't want Whirl to see was imprinted on her lips.

Whirl was fuming when, at dusk, they reached the ranchyard. He reined up and Maia was wisely silent while he had his memories and his regrets. Then he turned on her, angrily.

"Who in hell let the sheds an' barns an' house an' corral—ah, the whole huddem place run down like this?" he snarled.

There was a broad smile on the girl's face as she watched him snatch Pap's pegleg.

"My father is a cripple," she said in a tight voice. "My brother is, well, young and a little irresponsible. I'd hoped you'd come back and perhaps straighten him out"

Whirl grinned at the idea of the helling Whirl Arrow acting as dry nurse to some damn' poker-losing bum So he let that pass, put the horses in a sagging stable and went to the house.

THEY stepped from a side porch into the kitchen's chill, darkening gloom. A figure was dim in a chair beside the cooling stove, and it complained: "Maia? Whyn't you hurry back? The fire's gone out, an' we need light. And Kip ain't back from Roamer. Oh, that you, Kip? You fool, ain't you ever going to stop squirting around in town?"

"Pap!" Maia ordered. "Be still. This isn't—" she touched a match to a lamp wick and dull yellow filled the room—"Kip. It's Whirl Arrow come back home."

Whirl and the old man in the kitchen chair studied each other. Whirl glared at the whiskered, rheumy-eyed old son, who had, instead of a good right leg, a pegleg that had been nailed together many times, and wound with bailing wire.

"You come home, eh?" Pop cackled. "To eat, I bet, and your doggone plate is busted. Scally-wagging all over, while us folks hardly got enough vittles for ourselves."

"Shut up," snarled Whirl. "An' get up, before I kick your errant form to hellangone. A pegleg ain't stoppin' you from doin' chores an' gettin' in some wood. You sit an' wait for this girl to wait on you hand an' foot, an' do the

range work a young skunk ought to do."

He snapped his mouth shut, all-fired madded up because he'd taken up for a woman. "Get up!" he roared.

Pap got up and scuttled, nimbly enough, toward the door. It opened before he got there. A youth with a thin, dissipated face and weak mouth, dressed in cheap, flashy mail-order cowhand duds, came in. His breath reeked bum redeye when he opened his mouth to ask, "Ain't supper ready yet?"

"No!" Whirl rapped "An' won't be none until you've done some work. Clean a stable, or something. But work."

Kip King turned bloodshot eyes toward Whirl. He dropped one hand awkwardly to the handle of a cheap nickel-plated pistol and tried to lower his voice to an unnatural gruffness.

"Who're you to be talking to me, a friend of Cass Broone, like that?" he demanded threateningly.

A catlike stride; an open palm smacking flesh, a cheap pistol flung into a corner and Kip King into a chair.

"Whirl Arrow's the brand, you no account fuzzface," Whirl yapped. "An' if you ever pull that pistol on me, I'll shove it down your throat. You an' the ol' man get out an' earn your supper. You hear me yell?"

"Wait'll I tell my friend, Cass Broone," Kip whined as he went out. Pap thumped out behind him. Whirl turned toward the girl.

"You might mean right," she told him scathingly. "But hitting a weak boy and threatening a crippled old man is hardly a thing a man would do."

"Who cares if you think I'm a man?" he rasped, temper out of hand. "Who cares what you think about anything?"

She bent her head as she turned toward the stove. She answered Whirl Arrow only with her lonely heart: Some day I hope you will.

SUPPER was a meal eaten in sullen silence. Breakfast next morning was the same. Whirl tried to keep his eyes away from Maia, whose worn house dress had shrunken from too many washings, and held tight to the inspiring little figure that was hers. And because he couldn't keep his glances away from her, he grew angry again.

"I noticed the harness for the team was dried and rottin', when I looked around before breakfast this mornin'," he snapped. "You whiskered ol' goat, you'll oil an' mend it today," he told Pap. He turned to the sullen, defiant Kip.

"There's corrals to be mended. You'll start on that."

"Won't. I got to go to town."

"You'll fix corral!" Whirl thundered. "Or get hell beat out of you."

"Stop swearing and threatening," Maia snapped.

"Stop blattin' your female brains out," Whirl gave back. "They're goin' to work. Kip, get up from there. Move, damn you!"

Whirl's palm caught Kip's sullen face for the second time, rolled him out of his chair, and sprawled him on the floor.

"I'll fix corral," Kip panted, getting up. "And I'll fix you, too."

"Try it. Those corrals get fixin' first. Come on, you two. You're startin' to earn your beans."

He dug tools out of the wreckage of the harness and blacksmith shop and put Kip to work. Then sat Pap down with cracked harness and a can of saddle soap.

"You ain't going to work," Pap complained.

"I'm makin' a ride over what's left of the range," Whirl answered. He stopped and came walking back. "An' if you think you're goin' to stop, minute I ride out—"

He moved in quickly. There was a flurry of arms and legs, a squawk, a shrill curse. Whirl stepped back, holding Pap's negleg in one hand. "Bigosh, I guess that'll keep you there until I come back," Whirl hooted. "I'll take this lumber leg along with me."

"Maia!" Pap shrieked. But Maia didn't answer. She was watching from a window, a broad smile on her face. Nor did she come to Pap's assistance when he tried to hop to the house and found the task too much for him. So Whirl found Pap back at his task when he re-

turned, Maia was approaching when Pap held up a tug.

"Slick's new," he cackled. "Swell job. That's what we need around here: somebody to do swell jobs. Me, now, I aim to have this place shining and humming before very long."

Whirl nodded. Pap was childish with the vagaries of mood of the very old. Shame because he'd been so rough with Pap was a thing that bit Whirl's heart.

"Sure, Pap," he said softly. "An' maybe we can rustle the money to get you a good, new leg."

He turned. Maia had heard, and her heart was singing. She knew, now, there was kindness personified under Whirl's veneer of ornery stubbornness and violent ways.

"Maybe you can tell me why what few range cows we got ain't got half enough calves?" Whirl snapped at her. "Or why the stock ain't been shifted to new range. Never mind the last. You couldn't do it. Where's Kip? I aim to get some answers out of him."

"Kip—slipped away. I saw him too late to try to stop him," Maia muttered.

"You could go in after him," Whirl accused.

"No. You—well, you see, Whirl, I couldn't, because I'm afraid of Cass Broone. The way he looks at me!" she shuddered.

"Like that," Whirl said darkly. "Well, I'll go get him. An' he'll wish—"

"Whirl, no!" she begged. "Wait. Let's take the wagon. I need things from town. We'll both go in."

She raised one toilworn little hand. Whirl thought of the few dollars in his pockets Yes, she needed things. And he'd get them—oh, not for any reason other than the lady of Bent Arrow should have a few decent duds to wear, by damn!

"All right," he agreed, taking up the newly oiled harness and heading for the barn.

HE HOOKED a shaggy team to the rickety stock wagon and was tightening the endgate when his eyes suddenly narrowed. He climbed up and knelt, examining dark spots on the boards. He said nothing until he'd helped Maia onto the seat and was wheeling up the trail.

"Who used this wagon last?" he demanded abruptly.

"Why, Kip," she answered. "Why?"

"I'll answer why," he rumbled. "I got the answer to why the poor calf crop is poorer, an' the yearlin's ain't as many as they ought to be. Somebody has used this wagon to haul butchered beef in. You got any ideas?"

Her deep eyes swam with sudden tears. She sobbed, and her head was on his shoulder while she clutched convulsively at his shirtfront.

"Whirl, oh, Whirl," she sobbed against his chest. "I had guessed where Kip was getting the money he throws away at Cass Broone's, and one of the girls, Essie Doan, who works there.

"But I'm tired, so tired, and I'd lost all hope until you came."

Her warmth and nearness, her tears and smallness seemed to pull the heart and soul out of Whirl. He wanted to hug her until she was crushed into being a living part of himself.

Still, his outward stubbornness prompted, he'd been fooled before by women who shed easy tears.

"Kip'll be tired of somethin' too, before it's done," he growled, sliding along the seat away from her.

She straightened, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief fashioned from a bit of flour sacking. "I'm sorry I cried. But," with a sudden rise of spirit, "you're not going to hurt Kip. He's my brother, and he's young. He's taken the wrong pattern, is all. If he had a real man to use as a pattern—a man who'd try to understand—perhaps he'd be different."

"Nobody made a pattern for me," he grunted.

"No. And look at the sour twist you've taken against humankind. You—oh, Whirl, let's stop this quarreling. When you've got Bent Arrow back on its feet, I'll sell to you. For just enough to get

us off your hands. I don't want Bent Arrow, anyhow."

"What do you want, then?" He forced his voice to be calm.

She looked at him, then looked away, fumbling in a small, worn purse, hiding her confusion as best she might. "Here," she said, handing something toward him. He took it without thinking, and the contact of their hands sent tingling, dangerous sensations through both of them.

He scowled, then, at the large gold locket she had given him. "What the h—what's this?" he demanded.

"We've got to have groceries," she murmured sadly. "That locket is all I have left of my mother's things. I think there is a man in Roamer who will buy such things."

"You—you'd part with this, to feed your father and brother?" There was deep reverence in his tone.

"And you," she said simply, small head bowed and poor, rough little hands folded in her lap.

"Ahhh," Whirl Arrow almost groaned. He slipped the locket into the shirt-pocket over his heart, reined the team with the other hand, and looked at her.

Range silence and the rolling hills were around them, and there was silence on their lips; their lips together.

Her fingers quivered as they curved the back of his neck and she sobbed because she knew there were no words to express her want of him.

IT was Whirl Arrow who stopped this thing—before it ran beyond the bounds of endurance and restraint. Quivering, the girl whispered shakily, "Whirl, oh, Whirl, is it a shame to love as we have shown we do?"

"There's no sin in Heaven," he whispered back, shaking visibly as he picked up the reins and rolled the wagon on again.

The road ran its way almost into Roamer before he spoke. "This Cass Broone, now: what has he done to you?"

"Nothing. Except try to paw me, once. He offered to see that Kip stopped coming to his place, if I—I would—"

"I know." His voice sharpened impatiently. "An' he's still tryin', through Kip. Well!" There was grim finality in the word.

He walked the team up Roamer's sad Main Street, noting the place had changed but little since he'd seen it last. Only the old Palace of Pleasure had changed. A sign proclaimed the old structure now to be "Cass's Bar."

He hitched before the porch at the General Store and helped Maia alight. She cried, gaily but seriously, "I seem to be flying, not walking, Whirl."

"You fly into the store, then honey," he told her. "Get what you need. I'll —I'll see what I can do about the locket," he added with a lie.

He turned and put his course toward Cass's Bar, entered, had one small, quick drink and went on toward the rear where four men carried on a poker game.

Kip King, tighter than any gambler ever should be, weaved in his chair and looked up at Whirl. Fear flicked Kip's bloodshot eyes, and then he straightened defiantly and looked at Cass Broone, the heavy-set, thick lipped dark man across the table. These two took Whirl's attention, he dismissing the two punchers filling out the game.

Whirl nodded at an empty chair. "Is this a closed game?" he inquired, his look at Broone a dare.

"Not's far I'm concerned—bein' jest gone bust," one puncher answered, pushing back his chair.

"Nothing is closed here," Broone said too softly. "Not even the shooting season."

"Be sure you got a huntin' license sayin' you're damn' good," Whirl answered smoothly, sitting down.

The remaining puncher dealt. Whirl said, as he pushed some of his scant supply of dollars into the pot and discarded two: "You losin' as usual, Kip? Well, be careful. There'll he no more beef butchered an' hauled in from the ranch . . . By the way, who owns the Roamer butcher shop?"

"Why, Cass owns it—what the hell you getting at, Whirl?" Kip caught himself up and began shouting angrily.

"Gettin' at it that you'll be out of money after this . . . An' I'll raise you five . . ."

Kip glanced nervously at Broone as Whirl raked in the pot. Broone's mouth drew down, his look darkened.

Whirl dealt, and said, "Gettin' a young hothead in trouble so's his sister can pull him out is bad dealin' . . . An' I up 'er ten."

"What the hell's your mouth running off like this for?" Broone snarled. "Play poker, or go hire yourself a hall."

"I'm playin' poker, ain't I?" Whirl hooted, raking in another pot.

"You ain't ridin' no ol' mule to market. I'm bust," the puncher said, shaking his head as he got up.

BROONE pushed back his chair. "I got to get money from the safe," he snarled. He disappeared in the rear. When he returned, he wore a cunning look of satisfaction on his face.

"You better get out of this, Kip," he advised, picking up the deck. "Your dry nurse here, might not like your missing prayer meeting."

"Hell with him!" Kip looked at his diminished pile of coin. He glared at Whirl, who studied his cards until a warm arm dropped across his shoulders and a soft breath touched his cheek.

He looked around.

A blondined girl with hard lines around her mouth, pouted smiling red lips at Whirl, pursing them suggestively.

"Hon," she hummed through white teeth. "I love a winner. And you'll love Essie before we're many more hours acquainted." She leaned and laid her cheek on his head.

Broone said, low and to the drunken Kip: "Your money, now your girl. I thought you were a man, Kip. I—"

"Damn you!" Kip squalled, staggering to his feet. "Damn you, Arrow!"

He started pulling at the cheap pistol on his hip.

"Kip, you fool!" Whirl shouted, lunging to his feet. "Get a grip on yoreself!"

The girl, Essie, clutched his arm and got him off balance. She leaped back. It was then too late for Whirl to plunge in and grab Kip's arm. The nickel-plated weapon cracked spitefully.

Kip King, then, stood, white-faced and sobering, with a smoking pistol in his shaking hand. He groaned as he looked down at Whirl Arrow, who'd fallen like a man hit with an axe. Whirl didn't move.

The pistol fell from Kip's limp hand.

MEN rushed in from the street and Kip stared blankly at the Roamer marshal. He seemed to be under water when he heard Cass Broone say: "I ain't prepared to say if it was self defense or murder, marshal. Later on my mind'll be made up."

"Someday," the marshal said with open enmity, "a man'll come along who'll make up your dirty mind—with lead. Come on, kid, and try out the jail."

As he led the prisoner out, Maia's cry caused him to pause on the scuffed board walk. "I heard the commotion, marshal. What is it? What has Kip done?"

"Shot and killed Whirl Arrow." Cass Broone said from behind her.

Maia sagged. It took nerve, and a will as hard as steel that hell itself could never melt, for her to keep her feet.

"I ain't made a statement," Broone told her. "I may decide he shot in self defense; or maybe decide he murdered Arrow . . . Or do you understand?"

He moved aside to let the doctor enter the saloon, saying, "No use hurrying, doc."

The marshal choked on his own anger. "Miss King, you be careful. Maybe Kip can get off, anyhow."

"Yes; yes, perhaps," said Maia dully. "But—but Whirl!" She turned, and before they could stop her, she rushed into the saloon.

The doctor knelt beside Whirl Arrow as men parted to let her through; men who pitied this poor, sweet kid whose

(Continued on page 121)

A smashing body plunged through the roof and cut off Carter's snarled words to the girl.

"HOPPY" HOGAN'S conceit over his own dubious musical leanings played hell with the hold-up. The slab-sided, saddle-warped hunk of human flesh decorated by a walrus mustache twanged his Jew's harp to the torturement of the canyon echoes.

Burt Wayne shot out a hard, lean hand and gripped Hoppy's bony wrist. He growled, "Want we should have them shotgun guards a'ready primed for burnin' powder 'fore we get set? That kyoot-screechin', you opine is harmony, would rasp any hombre's ear-drums an' inspire murder in his innards a mile along this canyon. I been aimin' at a peaceable stick-up."

"Peaceable stick-up?" squawked Hoppy Hogan. "An' us with the prison white still ornamentin' our pans? Calls it kyoot-screechin', do yuh? I can smack out a tune on this Jew's harp that'll make horned toads set up an' lick their chops, an' the doves stop their cooin' out'n pure downright envy! An' the Boilin' River stage ain't due along here ontil sunset noways!"

Wayne's wide mouth twisted humorously, but the blue, dangerous eyes under a cowlick of coal-black hair snapped at Hoppy.

"Less you refer to us bein' escapes from the pen, the better it's liable to be for the health o' both of us!" said Wayne. "You keep yore empty mind on usin' yore hardware careful. We're wantin' nothin'

The trademark of murder that would swing Carter was a pair of gold-wheel spurs. But before anything could be done about getting the man off the stage, the ex-convicts found that first they had a girl to deal with

PRODIGAL SONUVAGUN

Illustrated by Paul H. H. Stone

By MEL DAVIS

but Boss 'Bunt' Carter off'n that stage. An' don't get to honin' for the registered mail sacks!"

"Huh?" grunted Hoppy. "An' yuh think yuh kin loop Bunt Carter off'n that Concord, an' make him talk, when all-a Basin County's totin' irons to git us prodigals from the state pen? An' yuh wantin' we should hold up old 'Smoky' Haggerty peaceable? Why, if I git my paws onto Bunt Carter, I'll make his dang Adam's apple race up and down his turkey buzzard neck! I'll—"

"You'll follow orders, an' all we want is to git Carter wearin' them same gold wheel spurs," cut in Wayne, one hand fingering the pocket of his blue wool shirt. "That's the one trademark o' murder that'll swing Carter an' clear us pronto. All o' Basin County knows them spurs, an' I didn't hide out this evidence in

Boilin' River canyon to have you cross up my purpose with yore hotheaded, gun-slingin' violence."

WAYNE was touching the gold wheel of a spur. It was wrapped in a bandanna. The wheel had been buried during the two years that Wayne and Hoppy Hogan had been in state prison, convicted of the fence-cutting ruckus in which old Jim Parsons of the Y-T spread had been crippled for life.

Wayne had been ramrod of the Double-X, which had been fighting the Y-T for grass and water. Wayne and Hoppy Hogan had not been involved in the wire-cutting battle, but they had ridden onto the scene just in time to be nabbed by a posse.

And then Wayne and Hoppy had escaped from jail at Big Basin. Wayne had found the gold wheel of the spur at the scene of the fence ruckus. And he had hidden it in Boiling River canyon after they had been surrounded by another posse.

Because Bunt Carter was the big boss of Boiling River range, Wayne had not attempted to use that gold wheel as evidence at that time. But two years of prison life had hardened Burt Wayne a lot. Hoppy Hogan always had been hard.

At this time and minute, the escaped convicts were in a gulch that opened on the Boiling River stage road. They had cut across Old Man mountain to this point, after seeing Bunt Carter board the stage down at Stubtown. They should be two hours ahead of the stage, as it had to follow the winding canyon trail.

"Couldn't be," said Hoppy Hogan thoughtfully, "that seein' Nata Parsons also gittin' on that stage has ary to do with you gittin' sech daggoned peaceable ideas, Burt?"

"You close yore trap on that or I'll turn yore yellow-jaunders turtle-green, you old he-hornet!" rapped out Wayne.

"Frum what I seen," persisted Hoppy, "our friend Carter's shinin' up to Nata a heap."

Wayne ground his teeth together and didn't reply. Hoppy had rubbed a sore spot. Nata and Wayne had done a lot of riding together before their adjoining spreads went to war over the grass and water grab fence.

Wayne had more than a suspicion that Nata Parsons, with her light-haired, lissome beauty, was one of Bunt Carter's motives for framing the shooting of Nata's father upon him and Hoppy Hogan. He hadn't admitted it even to Hoppy, but it was one of the reasons he had broken from state prison and was here to bring Bunt Carter to a showdown.

And now both Carter and Nata were on the stage, coming up from Stubtown to Big Basin.

Hoppy was unconsciously putting the Jew's harp to his snagged, yellow teeth again. But he made no sound with it.

"Keep yore hands still, both o' yuh!" barked a voice. It came from a gunny-sacked masked hombre. Wayne whirled and saw him. The man was standing straddle-legged in the gulch above them. He was lanky, of Wayne's old build. He wore disreputable overalls.

"I told you about that gang-whanged twangin' o' yores!" gritted Wayne to Hoppy. "Look what you brung!"

The hombre with the gunny-sack pulled over his and shoulders was sided by three other gunny-sacked gents. The four held the business ends of carbines upon Wayne and Hoppy.

"Drop yore guns, easy like!" commanded the masked leader. "As I live an' breathe, if'n it ain't our old friend Burt Wayne?"

"Skeller!" spat out Wayne, with disgust in his voice. "An' I s'pose yore bashful pards are the other gunnies that talked old man Gray into hiring you on Double-X without my knowledge! I'm not su'prised you hide yore faces in sacks, but how'd you keep unhung this long?"

For Wayne had identified the voice of a gunnie leader who had been wished under his foremanship on the Double-X two years before. He had strongly suspected that Skeller and his iron-slingin' pards had played along with Bunt Carter in the fence-cutting ruckus that had sent him and Hoppy to the pen.

His pony reared but already he was pulling the girl through a window of the stage.

"Callin' names ain't savin' yuh none!" jeered Skeller. "Git out'n that riggin' you're wearin'! I been trailin' yuh, an' you an' me's tradin' duds! Had an idee yuh was hidin' out to hold up the stage! Well, we're performin' that chore for yuh an' you an' Hoppy Hogan kin be takin' the blame!"

"Yuh's make a polecat shed tears o' shame fer bein' so plumb sweet to the smell!" roared Hoppy. "We hain't—"

Skeller took one step. His carbine barrel rapped Hoppy across one ear. As Hoppy went down, Skeller snarled. "Strip off'n his duds, Pete! You're his size, an' I'm Wayne's! We ain't no time to squander!"

Wayne's long body bent as suddenly as a snapped rawhide whip. His guns were on the ground. But his blurring knuckles packed a wallop equal to the smack of a .45 slug, if not so permanently fatal.

Skeller got it under the chin. He overended. But Wayne's advantage was short-lived. One of Skeller's compadres took care of that with a swinging carbine that all but cracked Wayn's head.

WAYNE turned over painfully in a hog-tie of lass rope. His mouth was stopped up with a wad of dirty bandanna. He saw that Hoppy also was similarly silenced, which was somewhat of a relief. Wayne groaned.

For Skeller had a mop of black hair,

much like Wayne's. With Wayne's peaked Stetson, his Vallejo chaps, wool shirt, and ivory-butted guns, and mounted on Wayne's bald-faced sorrel, the gunnie was a ringer for the prodigal convict. The slick wearing Hoppy's red-dyed chaps was about as slabsided as Hoppy, and there was no doubt but that Hoppy's paint horse had also become known in the alarm sent out for the pair of pen escapes.

Then Wayne added a few bitter cuss words to his groan. He heard Skeller's rasping voice. "Git the gal first off!" said the holdup leader. "An' I'll go fer the mail sacks, if'n I have to gun down Smoky Haggerty to hit 'em!"

Wayne was trying to figure out what this meant, as the Boiling River stage came creaking up the canyon grade. If Nata Parsons was riding with Bunt Carter, why was her abduction being plotted?

For Wayne had been taking it for granted during the past two years that Skeller and his gunslicks had really been working for Carter in that fateful gun-ruckus between the Double-X and the Y-T. Wayne strained savagely against the tying lass rope. Then he say Hoppy's pale eyes staring at him.

Skeller and his riders reined their py's duds now had their faces masked with handkerchiefs. The other pair still wore the gunny sacks. They made a clattering, whooping, surprise descent upon the high-wheeled Concord.

And by all that was holy, a six-shooter started cracking in a window of the stage. The face behind it was that of Bunt Carter. There could be no mistake about that hooked nose, the close-set eyes, and the tight lips thinned by cruel thinking.

Skeller and his riders reined their mounts apart. Two of the gun-slicks started shooting. Wayne saw the tough, veteran driver, Smoky Haggerty, start to lay on the whip. A guard beside him jerked up a short-barreled shotgun.

Bunt Carter's .45 continued to explode. Wayne swore bitterly. Any hombre might be a poor hand with a gun. But not even a tenderfoot could be that bad. For Carter's bullets only whined off the rocks in the vicinity of the scattering outlaws.

"Skeller said they're grabbin' Nata, an' bigod! Carter ain't nowise aimin' to drill them sidewinders! So—"

Wayne saw Smoky Haggerty look surprised and sag downward toward the dash of the Concord. Then Skeller, fully rigged in Wayne's duds, sent Wayne's sorrel plunging alongside the still rolling stage. Skeller reached up, hooked one hand, and heaved himself over the boot onto the stage roof, partly sheltered by the rope hitched mail sacks.

At that Wayne rolled. He set strong, white teeth into the lass rope knots around Hoppy's wrists. He bit right in until Hoppy squirmed and made profane noises under his gag, for Wayne's teeth went right on into the meat.

The stage guard's shotgun whoomed a double blast as the man pivoted and pumped it at Skeller on the stage roof. The stage ponies slowed, piled up against the canyon walls, and the Concord screeched to a stop.

Then it was that Wayne's tearing teeth brought a muffled howl from Hoppy. One of the gunnies reached a long arm through a window of the stage. His pony reared, but his arm was crooked around the slim, soft figure of Nata Parsons.

THE slender girl was fighting, clawing at her captor's face, but she was too gritty to scream. The holdup pulled her through the stage window. And the gunny-sacked gun-slick slapped the girl with a hard hand as she raked his face with her nails. Wayne went sick inside and cursed at his own helplessness.

Nata's shapely, rounded body went limp and her gold yellow hair was loosened from its combs, streaming nearly to the ground.

At this instant, Wayne had the knot freed from Hoppy's wrist, but Hoppy was not quick enough to turn Wayne loose, although the gagging bandannas came off.

"Bigod!" gritted Wayne, straining at the rope around his arms. "Carter's runnin' a ranny! He shot at Skeller an' them skunks, but he was shootin' to miss! Look!

Hoppy! That shotgun got Skeller, an' the others ain't waitin'! Get me loose, quick!"

Wayne judged Nata Parsons must be unconscious, and the masked gun-slick gripping her, roweled his pony back up the gulch. Wayne yelled imprecations and Hoppy halted his effort to untie Wayne long enough to heave to his feet.

For the other two surviving holdup slicks were following their companion. Beside the stage, a voluptuous, dark-haired dusky-skinned girl was screaming.

Wayne swore through clenched teeth as he saw Bunt Carter lift his six-shooter again. For when the weapon erupted, its lead sent up spurts of dust close to the ponies of the holdups who went pounding past Wayne and Hoppy.

Then Wayne heard Carter swear loudly.

"Damn 'em to hell! What you been doin', Smoky, that you didn't drill 'em?"

The guard up on the seat pointed to Smoky Haggerty. The driver was a still bundle now. His gun slinging days were over.

"They got 'im, but bigod, Carter, I got the hombre that done it!" rapped out the guard. "I damn nigh blasted his head off! An' say, ain't he answerin' the description of Burt Wayne?"

The three gunnies riding away with Nata had rounded a shoulder and disappeared up the gulch. Carter continued swearing lustily as he climbed the stage wheel.

"Burt Wayne, sure as hell!" he spat out. "Well, that's somethin', but we've got to roll into Big Basin an' roust out a posse to save Nata Parsons! You shove Smoky over an' leather the ponies! It'll be dark 'fore we can pick up the trail of the kidnapers! The one you shot the face off is Burt Wayne, a'right, and that's the answer to them abducting my girl!"

"Hoppy!" grated Wayne. "Git this rope off! I'll tear that low varmint apart with my bare hands!"

But the guard moved over and the stage was already rolling. Carter had pushed the dark-skinned girl back into the stage. She was still screaming and Wayne saw Carter put a hand over her mouth.

Wayne also saw, as the stage ponies straightened, that Skeller, wearing his rigging, was still lying across the top of the stage. The gunslick's face was bloody and flat, without one identifying feature remaining.

Wayne and Hoppy were forced to see the stage vanish up the canyon before they stood free. There wasn't a sign or sound of the bloody holdup left. The prodigals from the state pen were on foot, and unarmed. They had on the ragged levis of the gun-slicks who had exchanged with them. The discarded gunny-sacks used as masks lay on the ground.

"An' what's our next move, Burt?" groaned Hoppy. "It'll be teetotal dark in another hour, 'cept fer the moon. Them kyoots is high-tailin' straight for the malpais back o' Old Man mountain, an' a weasel couldn't pick up their sign. 'Sides that, I'm plumb naked 'thout my irons."

WAYNE slanted hard eyes at the lingering dust up the stage trail. His gaze came back to the gulch that petered out in a wilderness of painted rock and scrub brush.

"No use to wander into Big Basin after Bunt Carter now," he said. "Even if his poor shootin' proves the holdup was some frameup with Skeller, Hoppy, Carter planned to have Nata abducted, same as he ran that fence-ruckus ranny onto us. Give 'im time, and I'll gamble Carter himself would lead to where they'll hide Nata out."

Hoppy scratched his head thoughtfully. He put out some strange consolation for him.

"Yuh got the main idee, Burt. If'n that's so, then yore gal ain't been havin' no truck with Carter, an' this holdup's meant to force her hand," said the grizzled rider. "But right now, I'll bet Carter's dang nigh loco over that corpse ridin' the stage. It wa'ant in the cards, an' after what that guard spilled about it bein' you, Carter either believes Skeller is you, or he'll say so in Big Basin."

"First time I ever figured you had that

much brains, Hoppy. But sign or no sign, we're hittin' the trail of them holdups back through the gulch."

THEIR noses gave them fresh horse sign an hour after the full moon came up over Old Man mountain. It kept Wayne and Hoppy from limping down the wrong fork of a twisting trail on their blistered feet. They followed their lead, until the narrow horse track seemed to end up in a choked, mesquite-filled canyon.

Suddenly Wayne held up. He touched Hoppy's arm and pointed at the moon.

"Notice somethin' peculiar, Hoppy? Sight that moon an' the way this track's been meanderin'."

"By hokey!" grunted Hoppy after a few seconds. "Danged if them gal grabbers ain't been twistin' trail all the way back toward Big Basin! The way we've come, the town must be jest beyond that next hogback ridge!"

"That's what I'm thinkin', Hoppy. An' it's provin' up on what we figured out. 'Tain't more'n a coupla jackrabbit jumps over that ridge, an' Bent Carter won't have to be ridin' far to put on the big rescue act it's sure as sin he's got framed. We oughta be close onto them—"

A girl's clear scream of terror and fright rang out upon the chill, echoing mountain air. It was so close, in the choked canyon, that it seemed almost under their feet.

"Dally yore tongue, Hoppy!" growled Wayne, as an oath jumped from his partner's snagged teeth. "We've got-a git down there!"

Another scream turned Wayne's blood to ice water. Hoppy was close beside him as he let go all holds and took the downward pitch through thorny bush in a rolling plunge. Wayne saw a lamp light and the open door of a pinon shake cabin.

The cabin was perhaps fifty yards below, where a spring watered a small meadow. Although his eyes were fixed upon the yellow square of light that was the doorway, Wayne was conscious of feeding and sleeping cattle making a dark mass in the meadow.

It told him that, along with their other crimes, the Skeller outfit must be rustling some beef on the side. He speculated briefly, very briefly, upon whether this might not be a part of Carter's setup?

"Ease up, Burt!" gritted Hoppy. "Two more jumps an' we'd-a broke our fool necks! We can't make it down here!"

FOR the second time within a few hours, Wayne was forced to see the girl he loved undergoing mistreatment, while he was helpless. During the stage holdup, he and Hoppy had been hogtied. Now they were held up on the lip of a sixty or seventy foot drop that offered no foothold.

And, while Nata had not screamed again, the sight meeting Wayne's eyes induced a murderous rage that almost sent him taking a chance on smashing himself at the foot of the wall. For the fair-haired girl was in the hands of one of Skeller's brutal gunnies.

Fully revealed under the light of a single oil lamp swinging from the cabin ceiling, the hombre holding her was bearded and bulky of form.

And he was forcing her back over a table in the middle of the cabin. Perhaps she wasn't screaming again because the gunnie's coarse mouth was crushing her red lips, and he was pulling her closer to him.

Outside the cabin, on each side of the doorway, the two other gun-slicks of the holdup were looking on. Wayne could see the girl kicking and her hands clawing at the face of the hombre who was forcing his kisses upon her.

Wayne wasn't even thinking now that this might be a part of Bunt Carter's frame-up. He heard Nata moaning, as she attempted to fight off the attack.

There was no doubt but that Wayne went completely loco. His pulse beat madly, and his brain fairly sang with killing anger as he started running along the lip of the wall. Hoppy was close beside him.

"Damn him to hell!" rasped Wayne huskily. "I'll tear his black heart out with my bare hands! I'll—"

"Look, Burt! The end o' the wall overhangs the cabin roof!"

Hoppy clutched Wayne's arm. "We kin jump spang onto them shake shingles! An' look at that, Burt!"

A black horse reared suddenly into view, coming up the gulch. Its lone rider did not seem to be supported by any others, a posse. There was no mistaking the lean figure of Bunt Carter as he swung from the saddle.

Moonlight and the cabin lamp showed he had a pair of guns in his hands. And the pair of gunnies alongside the doorway moved a little to one side, dragging their weapons.

The narrow canyon was suddenly filled with the roaring of the .45s. Bluish flame stabbed from the weapons of Carter and the two gunnies. At that, the hombre in the cabin sprang back, releasing the girl.

Nata pulled herself to her feet. Her pretty face was white and strained.

The girl was staring into the night where the guns were flashing and cracking. Her attacker jumped for a holster hanging on a chair. Bunt Carter's high-pitched voice rang out.

"I don't care if there's a dozen o' yuh! I'll get all-a yuh for this! Nata! Get back, so's I can drill that sidewinder in there! I'll get you out o' here!"

It was so smoothly done, that even Wayne was held up for several seconds, watching. His belief was confirmed. With all of that promiscuous shooting, nary an hombre had dropped.

"Don't know's I ever saw more lead slung nowhere in perticklar," whispered Hoppy hoarsely. "Wait! Burt, I got me a loose rock!"

"Dally it, you idiot!"

Wayne grabbed Hoppy's arm just in time to save the skull of one of the free-gunning hombres under them.

"You bust in on it now, an' you'll git Nata hurt! I've got another idea! We can't go against them guns the way we are, an' in a minute we won't have to!"

HIS judgment was good. The outside gun-slicks were crawling away after spilling enough lead to have stopped a posse, and Carter was still untouched. Carter's last bullets pounded into the cabin doorway, but they didn't do any damage to the hombre who was inside either.

The gunnie who had attacked Nata sent a fast round of bullets into the moonlit night. But he was sidling across the cabin, and five seconds later he was out of a window and running with his partners toward a small horse corral.

"I'm coming, Nata!" shouted Carter's high-pitched, bombastic voice.

His lean figure showed in the doorway, smoking guns in his hands. Nata put her hands on the table edge, staring at him.

"Damn!" grated Wayne. "Listen, Hoppy! There's a leanin' cedar over the roof. See if we can make it down there without being seen."

Wayne went first, lightly. His lithe muscles deposited him almost silently upon the cabin shakes. He could both see and hear through the cracks where the shingles had warped.

He saw Carter walking toward Nata. The girl's eyes were upon him.

"Bigod, Nata!" Wayne heard Carter say explosively. "It's lucky I was smart enough to think of this canyon, an' leave the posse to take a passear over here alone! I was 'most crazy, but there wasn't any use startin' to trail you from the stage!"

Wayne crouched, listening. He saw Hoppy starting down the cedar. Any second now his blundering partner was liable to come crashing onto, possibly through the roof.

"You came after me alone, Bunt?"

Wayne heard Nata say it in a gasping, breathless voice. But he was sure he detected skepticism in her tone. Wayne knew that Bunt Carter believed himself smart. But he had an idea that Nata Parsons was smarter.

"Sure, Nata, honey," said Carter, boastingly. "Jackson, the guard, killed Burt Wayne on the stage roof. An' Hoppy Hogan was one of the hombres that took you off. I told your dad I bet it was their scheme to hold you, an' demand they be let off from their prison sentences

'fore they let you go, if they ever did."

All at once Nata's voice rang out clearly.

"Bunt Carter, you're lying! Burt Wayne never had that kind of thought in his mind! Poor Burt, now he's dead! But I'm telling you here and now, that if it was me he wanted, I'd have been a'mighty proud to have gone with him!"

All of his scheme, slick or dumb, thus thrown back into his teeth, Bunt Carter snarled out an oath. Wayne saw him take a step toward the girl, his hands reaching.

"So that's why you've been too high an' mighty to accept the offer of an honest man!" raged Carter. "You'd stick to a convict that gunned your dad, crippled him for life! Well, you'll be damn' glad to be hitched with me 'fore you get back to Big Basin! What I want I take—"

He lunged toward her, clawed hands ceizing and pulling her to him.

"One way or the other, you'll be glad to—"

CARTER'S snarled words were cut off by a smashing body plunging into and through the lightly built roof of the cabin. Hoppy's profane squawk accompanied the crash as he went down through the wide hole.

Wayne acted instinctively. As he glimpsed Carter starting back, freeing Nata Parsons and gripping the butt of one of his guns, Wayne landed beside him, feeling as if his legs were driven into his body.

Carter's gun swung around. His eyes were venomous. Wayne heard Nata cry out, "Burt! Oh, thank heaven! You're alive!"

Carter's .45 belched almost in Wayne's face as he dropped and lunged. His head was buried in Carter's thin stomach, folding the boss of Big Basin. The back of Wayne's head seemed to have been blown off by the blast of the gun, but it didn't seem to interfere with the blurring fist he shot into Carter's hatchet-like face.

Carter groaned, staggered back, but he had the gun up again. Wayne could only strike downward across the gun wrist. He hoped but to divert the bullet. The slug was deflected, but not in the way that he had intended.

For the .45 whirled over in Carter's hand, the muzzle flipping back. It flamed and roared almost in Carter's face. The boss of Big Basin was looking at Wayne, and a surprised expression came into his eyes a split second before they lidded over.

The last bullet in the gun had gone under Carter's chin and upward into his brain. And from down the canyon came the pounding of many horses.

"Holy catamounts, Burt!" yelled Hoppy. "We gotta light a shuck dang fast! Once them Big Basin hellions dab a loop onto us, we won't so much as git back to makin' hemp rope in the state pen, see'n we'll be stretchin' some o' the same *muy pronto!*"

But Hoppy's speech wound up in a snort of disgusted resignation to the inevitable. For the slender, lovely Nata was in Wayne's arms. Right there before Hoppy's buggging eyes, the girl was giving him huch a kiss as wasn't meant for any other hombre to be looking upon.

"Burt! Burt!" the girl sobbed. "I thought you were dead! Now I'll never let you go back! Never!"

It was the first time Burt Wayne had ever kissed Nata like that.

His arms tightened, as her lips parted for the first time under his crushing mouth.

"I reckon I'm knowin' when it's time for me to git," muttered Hoppy. "Burt! Dang yore hide! Lissen to 'em! They're right onto us!"

"Nata!"

THE voice was heavy with relief rather than sharp. Wayne released the girl, shielding her from the doorway with his body. He was looking at a gray-haired man still sitting stiffly astride his horse. The rider had but one leg and but one arm.

Wayne was looking at the leathery, rugged face of old Jim Parsons, for whose bullet wounds he and Hoppy had been sent to state prison two years before. Old

Jim's blue eyes were frosty under his shaggy, white brows.

Wayne said, "All right, Jim. You won't need the posse to take us in. We'll go along peaceable."

Old Jim Parsons seemed to ignore him. He spoke again to the girl.

"Thank heaven, Nata, you're safe," he said grimly. "I don't rightly savvy all o' this."

Although more than a score of riders were thronging behind Jim Parsons, Nata walked straight to the doorway.

"Dad, you're not taking Burt back. You can't. I won't let you."

"'Fraid I ain't got much say-so about that, Nata," said old Jim.

"I won't—I won't let Burt go!"

A lanky, hard-eyed figure alighted from a horse and shoved past old Jim. He was Sheriff Callahan, and Wayne saw him staring at the huddled body of Bunt Carter.

"Looks as how yuh done a completer job o' it this time, Wayne!" said Callahan grimly. "Reckon you an' Hoppy Hogan can be walkin' out! Where's yore irons an' where's yore horses?"

"We ain't got no dang—" began Hoppy.

"I'd never mind about that, sheriff," interrupted old Jim Parsons quietly. "I 'spect yore prisoners 'll ride peaceable on a double-up back to Big Basin. Nata!"

Nata flung her arms around Wayne again. He kissed her, and put her away from him.

"Maybe somethin' will happen," he told her. "You might be explainin' to your dad what's happened."

When the posse filed out of the canyon toward Big Basin, Nata was riding back beside Old Jim.

A SHORTER but a more crowded inquest had never been conducted in Big Basin. Wayne sat beside Hoppy on a hard bench. He was surprised that they had been brought into the office of the justice of the peace, who appeared to be also the coroner.

Wayne was more surprised when he saw old Jim Parsons come in on one crutch and seat himself behind a battered old desk. Old Jim did not appear to see either Wayne or Hoppy Hogan.

"Great catamounts!" breathed Hoppy. "I no more'n git over not bein' stung up pronto, until I find out we ain't got no chance, nohow! Did yuh know old Jim was jedge an' coroner, an' has all the say-so?"

"Nope," said Wayne. "I didn't know."

Wayne turned suddenly. Someone had sat down beside him. A warm hand was laid over his brown fingers. It was Nata. She was smiling a little, but she didn't speak.

Stern-faced ranchers and townsmen crowded the courtroom. Uncompromising eyes were directed at Wayne and Hoppy. There was an ominous air of expectancy pervading the small room. More ranchers and citizens crowded outside, unable to get in.

Old Jim started talking slowly. His deep-set blue eyes seemed to be looking at no one in particular, as if he was dreaming of something far away.

"As the justice an' coroner o' Big Basin county, I've called this inquest to render a double verdict," said old Jim without raising his voice. "But first, I'm having one witness. Bring in Carlotta Sanchez."

The blazing-eyed, black-haired girl who came in was the same beauty Wayne and Hoppy had seen in the stage holdup with Bunt Carter. Old Jim put a quiet question.

"What have yuh to say, Carlotta?"

A torrent of words spilled from Carlotta's red lips. She suddenly produced a small leather sack. From it she emptied a rain of clinking gold pieces onto old Jim's desk.

And then she finished, "Eet ees for that Bunt Carter buys me off to queet lovin' heem! He tells me to go away so he can have the *Señorita* Nata! I weel not go! So he ees say he will make heemself the big hero, so *Señorita* Nata will have heem! He ees, what you say, frame eet to hold up the stage! Then he ees go to save the *señorita!*"

Old Jim's lifted hand stopped her.

"From Carlotta 'n' some other evidence

(Continued on page 122)

TOO MUCH ROPE

By LEWIS BRADFORD

LATE one chilly afternoon in November seven riders on mettlesome horses clattered up to the weathered wooden railroad-depot building of a small town in southeastern Wyoming, not far from one of the main tributaries of the North Platte. They were a dusty, grim lot, these horsemen. Beneath the broad brims of their hats little of features was to be seen except sharp, predatory eyes, for every man of them was masked with a handkerchief or a bit of black cloth.

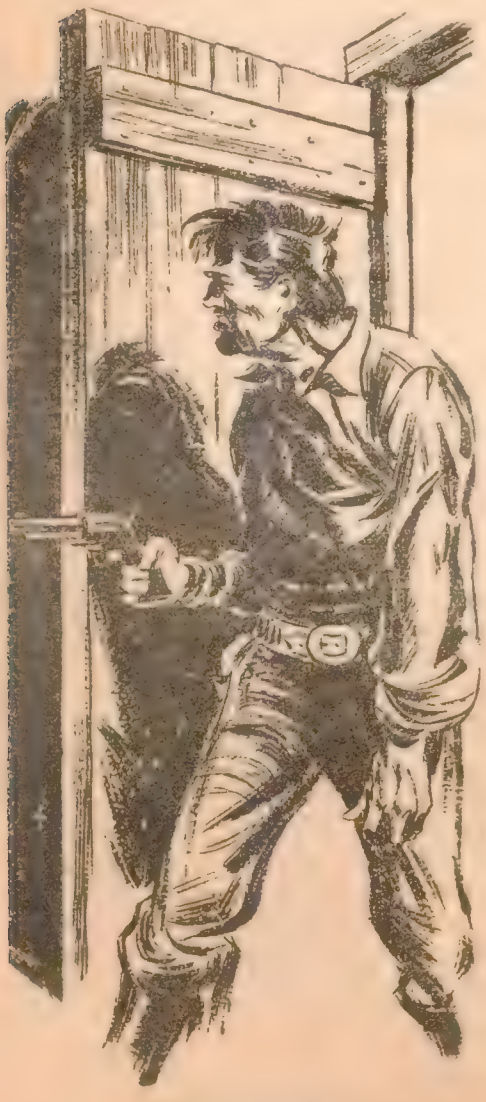
Each carried a rifle in his hand, and from their ammunition-filled cartridge belts sagged heavy pistols in worn holsters. One of their number, a lithe dark fellow with ornate boots, huge silver spurs of the type designated as "California," with rowels at least two inches in diameter, and a woven silver cord around his high black sombrero, had the

Illustrated by Frank Volp

Those bloodthirsty temporary deputies were taking the law into their own hands—the necktie-party way—and before he knew how it had happened, young owlhoot Curly, trying his best to leave the dim trails, was slated to be a star guest!

airs and pretensions that immediately stamped him as their chief. His mount was a magnificent bald-faced black that pranced and trembled with equine fire in every glossy muscle. It wheeled daintily as he whirled it about and cried curtly:

"Lowry, yuh an' Spade tend to the operator. The rest o' yuh ride with me."



Jake's face twisted into a leer as he saw Curly.

He spurred the black into a lurch of action and, followed by four of the strange cavalcade, galloped around the corner of the depot and off into the main street of the town. The two left behind speedily swung from their horses and ran across the loose, creaking plattorm of the station.

On two sides it was bordered by empty stockyards, nor was there a soul to be seen in the vicinity except the railroad telegrapher in his little office. He was a wizened, bald, insignificant man with a green celluloid eyeshade and black oilcloth guards to protect his sleeves. He was on his feet, peering in awed bewilderment over his spectacles as the two masked men, with drawn guns, marched into the door and covered him. They didn't bother to speak.

Without ceremony one grabbed him while the other popped a piece of oily waste into his gaping mouth and fastened a bandanna over it. With no lost motions, they tied the operator securely with a length of rope one of them carried. Or rather Spade did. Leaving him to finish the job, Lowry turned to other work. He picked up an axe used to chop kindling for the pot-bellied stove in the corner of the office and proceeded to wreck the instrument desk. He splintered the wooden top, scattered musty papers in trays and clipboards, sent pens and ink flying in all directions and smashed at the telegraph instruments with lumberman's vigor till they appeared a tangle of metal, wood, and wire. Halfway through this chore he stopped, looking over his shoulder.

Spade was on his knees, with his back to him, busily taking half-hitches in the rope around his unfortunate victim. Then Lowry did an odd thing. He picked up a stray telegraph blank, scribbled something on it, folded it. He wielded the axe again a few more times, noisily, and as Spade sprang up, leaving the operator

bound and gagged on the floor, called: "Ready?" and jerked his head toward the door. Just before he followed Spade out the door, that bit of paper dropped in a conspicuous place on the ravaged desk.

THEY mounted and sped away in the direction their companions had taken. A spurt of some five hundred yards brought them abreast a sedate frame building whose big windows, half-curtained with green baize on brass rings, bore the legend: FERNALD CITY BANK. The street and environs seemed to be as deserted as the station. In an alleyway at the side of the bank Spade and Lowry saw another of their band herding five horses.

Before they themselves could dismount, the four other partners, their guns glinting menacingly in the declining sunlight, backed out quickly through the wooden pillared front entrance. The man with the silver cord carried a canvas bag with bulging sides. Their guns, silent up to now, belched flame into the air as they leaped into their saddles—a warning, or perhaps merely a gesture of derisive good-bye. Then almost with the precision of a cavalry unit, they swung their horses and thundered down the road.

In a few moments only a settling cloud of dust, merging with the sunset haze of the horizon, marked the passage of the mysterious raiders.

Some hours later the seven sat around a fire in a dense cottonwood grove. They had ridden forty miles since their informal call at Fernald City and they were tired and out of humor. Their faces now revealed by the crackling flames, it was to be seen that they were all young men, possibly none over thirty-five: the youngest, addressed by the others as Curly, a slim lad not turned twenty, with gray eyes so pale against his deep-tanned skin as to seem well nigh colorless; the oldest, the man called Lowry, heavyset and wry-mouthed, and with close-clipped hair already showing streaks of gray.

They lay prone on clumps of buffalo grass or sat resting against their saddles, smoking and muttering in monosyllables when they talked, which was seldom. Not far away a stamping in the brittle underbrush or an occasional snort or whicker disclosed that their horses were picketed in the shadows not distinguishable except when a big rolling eye caught a fleeting ray from the fire. The men were hungry, for they had not eaten since midday; and the prospects for a meal before noon of the following day, to judge from the trend of the talk, seemed decidedly slim. Their chief, the man in the silver-corded sombrero, was speaking:

"Yuh sure yuh wrecked up that telegraph complete, eh, boys?"

"Lowry smashed 'er to smithereens," chuckled Spade. "Didn't leave enough to send a squeak over."

The chief spat and rubbed his jaw. "*Bueno.* Then the first news they can git to Halfmoon Junction'll be by the eleven o'clock train. By that time we'll have cleaned the Security Bank an' be headin' fer Colorado an' points south."

Curly, whose lean fingers had been tinkering with a loose cinch-ring, now pushed his saddle aside. He stared intently across the fire at the chief for a moment, then said quietly:

"Jake, yuh'll have to count me out, I reckon."

Stubbled, travel grimed faces jerked, wearied postures stiffened to sudden attention. The men all looked as if they had not heard aright. All eyes shifted slowly, uncomprehendingly from the speaker to the chief.

"Huh? What's that?" he grunted, his jutting brow furrowed.

"I said I'm quittin', Jake," came the drawlin~, even reply.

"Yuh mean yuh're not fixin' to sit in on that Halfmoon job tomorrow?"

The pale-faced youth shook his head, slow, from side to side. His glance rested on the saddlebags that lay beside the chief. "Uh-huh. I'm takin' my split an' pullin' my stakes now."

THE chief clamped his strong yellow teeth together like a buzzard gnashing its beak. He leaned forward.

"Listen, yuh yellerbelly. I'm here to announce nobody gits a red cent o' this haul—" his eyes swept the circle—"that don't ride into Halfmoon with us tomorrow mornin'."

"Yuh mean yuh won't give me my lawful share?" Curly flared.

"My talk was plain."

"Then, by gosh," exploded the hot-blooded youth, "I'll take it out o' your measly hide!" His hand raced for his holster, but before he could draw, two arms of steel whipped about him. The wry-faced Lowry, agile as a cougar, had leaped up and seized him from behind.

"Easy. Easy, kid," Lowry cautioned. "There's no call fer gunnin'. This yere kin be settled plumb peaceable."

"Who asked yuh to butt in, Lowry?" Jake snapped. "Yuh take too much on yerself for a newcomer, d'yuh know it?"

"Aw, he's only a kid—" still grinning, unabashed. "Probably wants home so's his mamma kin wipe his leetle nose."

"Let me go," the youth panted, his legs thrashing. "I'll beef the crook if it's the last thing I do."

"Let 'im go, I tell yuh," cried Jake, his face contorted. "I'll fix 'im so's—"

At which point Curly suddenly sagged, crumpled to the ground. It happened with such amazing swiftness that none of the others saw much more than a blur of motion. As the youth fought wildly to free himself, Lowry had pulled his gun, brought it up and crashed the barrel against Curly's skull.

"Guess that'll take some o' the cussedness outta him," was Lowry's dry comment as he deliberately replaced the weapon in its holster and squinted at Jake, who was torn between fury and astonishment, too flabbergasted to speak. Lowry was still grinning, but his hand lingered near the pistol-butt. "These young 'uns ain't got no respeck fer their elders these days, not any."

Jake worked his lips nervously boring with gimlet gaze into the other.

"Yuh're a cool 'un," he muttered at length, but his hand slipped away from the region of his breast and the tension of his body relaxed. Then he cocked an eye as if reconsidering, spat as if disgusted with the whole business and took up one of the saddle-bags.

"Let the little skunk have the money," he growled. The thumbed through a couple of packets of new banknotes and threw them across the fire to fall near the prostrate figure. "Yuh, Lowry, since it 'pears yuh've gone in fer child nursin', git 'im outta my sight. The sooner he clear out the better fer his health."

Lowry picked up the thrown money and stuffed it into Curly's inner coat pocket. Then slinging the youth easily over his shoulder and stooping to catch up his saddle with his free hand, he moved off to where the horses were picketed. He dropped Curly at the foot of a tree, quickly saddled the youth's horse, and returned to him.

The pale-eyed Curly was just stirring from his coma. Lowry shook him none too gently. Curly opened his eyes, licked his lips, and felt dazedly of his head. Then, memory returning, he spluttered an oath and tried to make a lunge at the man bending over him. But Lowry grabbed and twisted a handful of his shirtfront, high up near the collar, pushing him back. With a furtive glance toward the fire, he whispered:

"Yuh keep still, yuh fool, hear? It ain't your fault yuh ain't smoked out this minute. Why, Jake could give yuh a leap-year head start an' still beat yuh to the draw." He peered over his shoulder again, then smacked the inner pocket where he had put the currency, with a flick of his fingers. "Yuh got yer money. Now take my advice: Yer pony's all saddled. Fork it an' vamoose—pronto."

Slowly Lowry released his grip but continued to hold him with his eyes. Curly reached into the pocket, partially pulled out the packet of bills and stared at them hard. Without a word he shoved them back, and got to his feet, then, untieing his horse he swung into the saddle and headed the animal south.

IT was about eleven o'clock that night when Curly rode into the Halfmoon Junction. The town was the county seat

and important as a terminus for trail-drivers from the south with herds of longhorns to sell, and whither northern ranchmen came to buy. Abounding in saloons, gambling-rooms, and dance-halls, and a floating population of cowboys, miners, muleskinners, honky-tonk sirens, cattle kings and derelicts, gamblers and assorted suckers, it was usually a very lively place. But tonight it seemed, to one who knew it as well as Curly, that things were singularly quiet.

The gay, raucous noises were muted somehow; there were few people on the street. There semed to hang over the town an aura of restraint, or of ominous expectancy. Or was it his imagination, his own uneasy conscience, Curly wondered, and pulled his hat lower over his eyes.

His throat was dry and he pulled up before the largest saloon in town, Pete Westervelt's place, bearing the quaint sewing-circle name of "The Idle Hour." He tied his horse at the hitchrack and entered. There were plenty of people there, the bar and gambling tables were crowded; but once again he was assailed with the impression of unwonted sobriety and tension.

Curly unobtrusively found a place at the bar-counter and smiled as he saw the look of surprise of one of the barmen who came up to take his order. It was the walrus-mustached Pete Westervelt himself, the owner distinguished from the help in that he wore a black suit and no apron.

"Dog my cats!" cried Pete, wiping a red hand on a damp cloth and extending it toward Curly. "If 'tain't Rance Benton!"

"Howdy, Pete," Curly said lightly, shaking hands.

"Ain't laid eyes on yuh fer two years. When the devil d'yuh git back to town?"

"Tonight."

"Wal, I'll be— Where you been hangin' your hat all this while?" Pete hastened to pour a drink and pushed it toward him. "Seems to me I heard yuh'd drifted up in the Dakota country punchin' cows."

"Yeah, I reckon I've been migratin' 'round some," admitted Curly, and poured down the whisky neat. He squinted through the empty glass and grinned. "Ain't changed the quality of your rot-gut, I notice. Still coupla shades worse'n rattlesnake poison."

"Ha-ha," laughed Pete, giving his mustache end an embarrassed twirl. "Same old Rance. Allus have yer little joke."

Someone clapped a hand on Curly's shoulder from behind, and he whirled, reaching for his gun. He looked into the faces of Sheriff Neil Stokes and his deputy, Hank Glassick. The sheriff's smile of greeting froze and his hand remained outstretched as he noted the alert crouch, the half-arrested reach for the pistol.

"Why, hello, sheriff," Curly stammered, forcing a grin.

"Wal, wal, wal," said the sheriff in his hearty bass, recovering himself, "If yuh promise yuh won't shoot me, I'll shake hands with yuh."

His heart pounding, Curly shook hands with both.

"Funny, the Colonel never told me yuh was back. How are yuh, Rance? Kinda expected yuh'd be hung long afore now. Back to stay?"

Curly, to avoid questions, said he reckoned so, and invited them to a drink, which they accepted. As Pete came back to attend to them, he remarked to Stokes with a chuckle: "What d'yuh think of our visitor? Same old Rance, eh?"

"Ain't been tamed any, if that's what you mean." The sheriff good-humoredly surveyed the pale-eyed youth from head to foot. He chewed the end of a stogie, frayed and extinguished. "Gettin' to look like the spittin' image of the Colonel. By the way, we're expectin' him to show up any minute."

"Here?" cried Curly.

The sheriff nodded. "Goin' to make a little talk an' do some recruitin'."

Curly looked puzzled, and Pete put in knowingly: "Gittin' ready fer them bandits."

The words sent a chilly tremor up the youth's spine and made the hair at the base of his neck prickle. To hide his

consternation he swallowed his liquor at a gulp.

"Yes, we aim to be ready fer 'em if they show up tomorrow. You heard, I s'pose, Rance? Jake's boys held up the Fernald Bank this afternoon. Got away with more'n forty thousand dollars."

"That so?" the youth said in a dead voice. "I hadn't heard."

"Fer a fact. An' they had the gall to leave a note sayin' they was headin' here to hold up yore dad's bank. Me, I sorta hope they mean it."

"What I can't understand, Neil," spoke up Glassick, the deputy, a bandy-legged and slightly stoop-shouldered individual, "is why, if they does mean it, they go fer givin' it away. Don't listen reasonable to me. Take the trouble to mask their faces and then leaves a visitin' card, yuh might say. How do we know 'tain't some other gang cashin' in on Jake's repitation?"

THE sheriff hitched up his trousers about his bulbous equator and waggled his cigar emphatically. "Wal, whoever they be, if they come, they'll git to see plenty fireworks, an' not the fourth o' July kind neither. We'll lead 'em up so's their ornery carcasses'll be too heavy to drag aroun' comfortable."

Curly looked anxiously toward the entrance. His heart pounded so hard he felt sure the others must hear it. He told himself he must leave—and *now*. He threw down a bill to pay for the drinks. In his agitation he did not realize it was one of the brand new bank-notes and only became aware of the fact when Pete commented laughingly:

"A hunnerd? Say, Rance, yuh must be flourishin'. Ain't yuh got nothin' smaller?"

Curly blanched under his tan. From the tail of his eye he fancied he saw a look of suspicion appear on the sheriff's face. Not six inches from Stokes' sleeve, in the youth's breast pocket, were nearly four thousand dollars in identical crisp new bills—his share of the loot of the Fernald Bank.

In a voice he hardly recognized as his own he said. "I have, but I'd like to bust it, Pete." And with affected levity, "Made a little killin' at poker."

But their attention was diverted by the entrance of several newcomers. Two or three were influential cattlemen, one a rich mine-owner. Conspicuous among them was a slim, white-haired man of medium height, cleanshaven except for a bit of whisker under his lower lip. His eyes had the same striking greyness as Curly's, and he walked with the erect military carriage of an old soldier.

"Here comes the Colonel now," said Stokes. The banker spotted the sheriff at the same moment and he and his group approached.

Curly, feeling definitely trapped, stood rigid. The two pairs of pale grey eyes met, clung. Then with a gasp, an exclamation of pleasure, the older man was at the youth's side in a few eager strides.

"Rance! My boy!" he cried, his hands on Curly's shoulders, his eyes shining with a suspicion of tears. He pressed him to his breast, then held him off to scrutinize him again, displaying a depth of feeling Curly had never suspected in his parent.

"You rascal," he chided Curly in a rather quavering voice, smiling with delight," I ought to whop the livin' tar out of yuh right here in public, goin' off thataway. We've got to stick together from now on. The bank's doin' more an' more business every year. Need a bigger

place, an' I've been figurin' of raisin' a new buildin'—of brick—the finest on Main Street, b'gosh. An' print on the windows in big gold letters: "Halfmoon Junction Security Bank, J. F. Benton *and Son*, proprietors. How does that strike yuh?"

CURLY felt his eyes smart and in his throat the cords seemed to become entangled in knots. He grinned and admitted it sounded fine to him, while he hated himself as he said it and his brain was in a state of turmoil. Why in heaven's name, he asked himself, had he stopped in Halfmoon? How could he have been such a jackass? It had been his intention to keep going, heading south. Vaguely his destination was Mexico, where a young fellow with money in his jeans was sure to find plenty of excitement. What devilish impulse had tempted him to stop off here? Was it homesickness? He couldn't say, and thought bitterly he'd give every cent he had to be a hundred miles away.

"Yuh know, son, I was gettin' plumb worried yuh'd never get back," his father was saying. He smiled. "Don't need to tell *me* how cussed stubborn yuh are. So two three months ago I hired me a Pinkerton to see if he could round yuh up. He traced yuh up into the Black Hill an' later to an outfit up 'round Fort Benton, but I reckon he sorta lost your trail up there—ain't heard from him in nigh a month . . ."

Here the sheriff intervened. "'Scuse me, Colonel, but seein' as yuh got most everybody corraled 'round the bar, how's fer startin'?"

"What's that? Ah—oh, yes. Rarin' to go, sheriff." He gave Curly's arm a squeeze and said, "Got a little speechifyin' to do. Won't take a minute."

Hank Glassick, the deputy, set a chair in the center of the floor, and Benton mounted and called for attention. Singly and in groups the men drifted over, till they were massed solidly before him in a semicircle in attitude of respectful interest. To most of them Colonel Benton was *the* man of the town, and his bank was the rock on which it was maintained. Without preliminaries the white-haired banker plunged into his subject:

"It seems, gentlemen," he uttered with a twinkle of good humor, "that the gang of cutthroats stylin' themselves Jake's Boys is plannin' to pay us a visit tomorrow mornin', with the intention of makin' free of the bank an' the town in general. I suppose yuh-all heard about it by now—"

Something like an angry roar went up from that case-hardened assembly of punchers, miners, trappers, and outdoorsmen. Distinguishable in the outburst were cries of "We'll string 'em up, the—!" and "We'll make crow-bait outta 'em!"

"Those Jake's Boys," went on the Colonel, "are a powerful bad lot. They need exterminatin', an' if I know this town we're the folks to do it . . ."

The men broke in and shouted their approbation.

"Now, I've been discussin' the thing with several members of the Cattlemen's Association an' other prominent gentlemen an' it seems to us the best way to handle it is in a businesslike way. Now it's our idea an' Sheriff Stokes' to deputize twenty-five men, preferably single. I personally will undertake to finance the payroll. An' those of yuh that are tied up with a job, I'm sure your bosses will let yuh off for the purpose. Those that want to sign up, the sheriff and Deputy Glassick will swear yuh-all in at the corner of the bar."

There was another wild shout, and a mad scramble of the listeners to reach the sheriff first.

During the foregoing scene Curly had remained standing at the bar, not far from the door. With the feeling of an icy hand groping round his heart, he heard his father's words. He passed his hand over his brow and it came away wet. Licking his lips nervously, he waited, for the Colonel's eyes commanded the entrance. But a few moments later, in the confusion and rush of the men eager to offer their services, he found his opportunity.

Unobserved, he slipped to the door

Lowry seized the axe and proceeded to wreck the instrument desk.

and out. He quickly untied his horse at the hitchrack and jumped into the saddle. In five minutes he had left the town well behind him.

CHAPTER II

"Arrest This Man!"

CURLY rode into the night, with a late-rising moon, huge and sickly yellow, shedding a wan radiance over the uneven trail. His horse had carried him far that day, was nearly fagged. But the youth was determined to put as many miles between himself and Halfmoon as possible. Almost as if actually hard-pressed by some enemy, he forced the faltering animal to the limit. He had covered about ten miles when he horse stumbled in a badger hole, almost throwing Curly clear out of the saddle. At the same instant he thought he heard a sharp crack, and his heart contracted as he swung down, expecting to find a broken foreleg. But a hasty examination disclosed no fracture, though the animal limped painfully and he realized that it could carry him no further tonight, probably not for another day or two.

It was twenty miles to the next town, and the nearest ranch-house was nearly half that distance. He decided there was nothing for it but to camp out and, slowly leading his limping mount, he began searching for a likely spot.

He was passing through a densely thicketed swale when he spied what appeared to be some sort of habitation, about two hundred yards from the trail, and almost hidden by a screen of cedars and jackpine. It was a deserted shack, and he remembered it belonged to a trapper who ran a line over the ground in the winter. The night—it was after one o'clock—had grown uncomfortably cold and the place would have to serve as shelter. He tied his horse to a tree, unsaddled it, and carried saddle and blanket to the shack.

Within he found, by the light of a match, a bit of candle stuck on a rude table. The place looked and smelled as if it had known no human for years. Its single rough-boarded room was dank and moldy, and monstrous cobwebs hung from the rafters, swaying eerily with the chill breeze that Curly let in with him. The furniture consisted of a bunk fashioned from planks against one wall and covered with a pile of mildewed burlap, a stool and a couple of small packing-cases evidently used as chairs, a few rusty

cooking utensils hung on nails and a tin Dutch-oven with some ready-cut wood piled nearby.

Curly lit a fire, threw off the rotted, ill-smelling rags from the bunk and spread his saddle-blanket on it instead. Then he rolled up his coat for a pillow and, blowing out the candle, stretched himself out wearily, smoking a last cigarette.

He was quite calm now, and felt safe. What that day would bring to Jake and the gang didn't trouble him much: He was out of it and in the clear. Though for Lowry he did have a little sympathy. Too bad about him. He was a queer sort of critter, Lowry, but the more the youth thought about it the more did he feel convinced he owed his life to the man.

THROUGH Curly's mind flashed a picture—Jake's boys riding confidently into Halfmoon, drawing up in front of his father's bank. Then suddenly, out of the silence of the early morning (for the raid was planned for nine o'clock, the hour of opening) a blast of flame, a withering fusilade, bullets flying from a score of hidden vantage points. The gang, trapped, cut to pieces before they could even get into action against the unseen foe. . . .

Who had betrayed them? Whence the note revealing the identity of the gang and the plan to attack? And if the Fernald telegraph was wrecked, how had the news reached Halfmoon?

Rack his mind as he would, Curly found no answers. He watched the glow that came through the chinks of the stove, throwing fitful patterns on the dust-packed floor, till he fell asleep.

He awoke late that morning, hungry and depressed. He went out to look at his horse, found some swelling of the sprained leg, and gave up all thought of using the animal that day. He let the animal graze near a small brook.

Suddenly his attention was aroused by the pounding of a horse. Through the trees he glimpsed a black, bald-faced animal galloping along the trail. It was riderless, but even at a distance he recognized it as Jake Slemp's mount. It was moving at a dead run, as if frightened, and was soon out of sight. Curly wondered what it meant.

Returning to the cabin, he found a greasy deck of cards on a shelf and tried to amuse himself playing solitaire, but his interest was gone. With a sweep of his arm he sent the cards flying in all directions, jumping up and striding the room.

He whirled when he felt, rather than saw, the door open. Standing on the threshold was Jake himself. His silver-corded sombrero was gone, his left arm, soaked with blood, hung limply by his side. In the hand of the other was a Colt forty-five. Evidently he was as surprised to see Curly as the youth was to see him, for his beady eyes widened and he caught his breath. Then his face twisted in a horrible leer.

"So it's yuh. I reckon I see it all now."

CURLY stood frozen. The buzzard bleakness of Jake's face was accentuated by his frenzied anger. Wordlessly he jerked his gun upward, and the pale-eyed youth raised his hands at the silent command. The bandit chief kicked the door to behind him. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt. He took two quick steps forward and pried the pistol from Curly's holster, using the injured arm with painful difficulty and nearly dropping the weapon from the nerveless fingers before he succeeded in getting it into his pocket. Bright trickles of blood ran down the hand and sprinkled on to the floor. The simple act seemed to Curly to take hours.

"Now tie my arm," Jake gritted through his teeth.

The youth looked into the muzzle of the forty-five and it looked to him as large as a hogshead. He licked his lips and nodded. He took Jake's arm and carefully pushed back the sleeve above the elbow. A bullet had gone through the forearm, splintering one of the bones.

"Got nothin' but the handkerchief to tie it with." He showed Jake his bandanna.

"Tie it," Jake spat out, casting a quick

glance toward the shack's single window. "Tie it tight." He looked back to Curly and went on, biting off his words: "So yuh thought yuh'd git away with it —doublecross us an' git us all shot!" Well, they prett' near cleaned us, the whole bunch, but they never got Jake. Ain't yuh sorry, yuh—"

"Yuh're wrong," said Curly, without looking up from the arm, "*I* didn't doublecross yuh."

"Don't want to die, do yuh? Don't like the idea, do yuh? Mebbe I ought to thank yuh an' leave yuh to collect the reward?" his voice vibrated with rage. "There's ten thousand dollars on my head. Reckoned on gettin' it, didn't yuh?"

He jerked his head toward the window. The dull thunder of approaching hoofs was heard—many horses, by the volume of sound, and running at a rapid pace.

Curly was tying the knot of the impromptu bandage. Suddenly he gave the injured arm a terrific wrench, pulling Jake around so that for an instant he was off balance and the gun out of position. Jake uttered a sharp cry of pain, followed by a grunt as Curly sank his right with every ounce of his strength deep into his midriff. Then he was swarming all over the outlaw chief, his legs entwined around his trunk, his hands clutching to gain possession of the Colt. The two went down with a crash that shook the cabin.

Jake was a much bigger and more powerful man, but it was two hands against one, and the chief had lost a great deal of blood. He lunged with his knee at Curly's groin, gouged weakly at his face with the fingers of the injured arm. They rolled, reversed positions, snarled like wildcats, kicked and butted. But the pale-eyed youth clung to that gun-hand, never once let go, and he was gradually forcing it behind Jake's body. Desperately Jake heaved himself up, trying to turn. There was a reverberating roar. Curly felt his enemy grow limp in his grip.

For several seconds, panting, his hair streaming over his eyes, he stared uncomprehending. The gun had gone off, tearing a great hole in Jake's throat. Then came a ghastly rattle. Jake's body twisted convulsively and lay quiet. He was dead.

CURLY staggered to his feet. Outside the throbbing beat of horses was still to be heard, but they seemed to have passed the shack. A moment later

they were coming nearer again, from the opposite direction, as if the riders had been attracted by the shot. Soon he heard animals crashing through the underbrush toward the place. Curly had not moved from the spot. He saw the door fly open at a kick, and the frame bristled with rifles and shotguns.

It was about a dozen of the sheriff's posse, Stokes at their head; and with him, stern and erect, a Sharps rifle grimly clamped in his hands, was Curly's father. They stared at the youth, then at the body at his feet. After a moment's hesitation, Stokes stepped forward and turned the body over.

"That's Jake Slemp," he announced, straightening, to the Colonel. He seemed to be puzzled, and raised his brows at Curly: "What happened, Rance?"

Curly knew that anything he might say would sound highly improbable. With an impatient gesture he brushed his hair out of his eye and spoke:

"I came an' stayed here last night. A while ago the feller came in, wounded,

an' asked me to tie up his arm. He had his gun out an' said he was goin' to kill me. I tied his arm an' then we fought for the gun. Next thing I knew he was dead."

Curly read nothing but incredulity in the faces before him. His father's eyes were narrowed and were observing him intently.

"Are yuh tellin' the truth?" the old man snapped.

"I'm tellin' yuh how he came to be killed."

"Why did yuh disappear last night? What made yuh come here?"

The pale-eyed youth felt the best thing he could do was to be silent.

"I've got nothin' to say," Curly muttered, white-lipped.

"Now see here, Colonel," the good-hearted Stokes began, but the Colonel cut him off.

"Sheriff, two of that gang got away. One of 'em was Jake. Who was the other?" His eyes shifted toward his son and burned into him. "These scoundrels killed Hank Glassick and wounded two other decent citizens tryin' to uphold the law. The law makes no exception between my son and anyone else's. If Rance was with 'em, by heaven he'll hang as high as Haman, if I have to spring the trap mlself!"

Stokes was almost in tears. "But, Colonel," he protested, "we've got no proof—"

NO sooner had he uttered these words than three newcomers pushed their way into the room. They had just ridden up, and one of them carried a pair of leather saddlebags. They stared curiously at the body on the floor, and Stokes explained in a single word: "Jake."

"Got him, eh?" grunted the man with the bags, whom Curly recognized as Hank Glassick's brother, Jess. "Sorry I didn't git the chance to do it myself. That makes five we got—one of 'em got away, seems like."

He did not notice the glances cast in Curly's direction, and went on: "Look, sheriff. Took these offen Jake's bald-face hoss. Found him down the trail a stretch. 'Pears like the onery coyote slipped off an' let the cayuse run, to put us off the track. Look what's in one of 'em." And unbuckling the flap of a pouch, he upended it and a small shower of fresh new bills in packets fell onto the table.

"The Fernald money, ventured the Colonel.

Sheriff Stokes picked up a packet and examined it. The bills were hundred-dollar notes. Suddenly his brows contracted. He shot a quick glance at Curly.

"Yuh changed a brand-new hundred-dollar bill at the Idle Hour last night, Rance," he said quietly. "Might happen yuh got any more on yuh?"

The youth swallowed hard. "I don't see that it's any of your business."

"By heaven, we'll make it our business," cried the Colonel. "Search him, sheriff."

"Nev' mind." Curly felt the game was up. He reached into his breast pocket and laid down a stack of bills. The sheriff examined them, compared them with those from the saddlebag.

"The series numbers match," he announced dully, biting his lip and averting his eyes from the Colonel, too overcome to meet his gaze. But the banker was beyond paying attention to anything but his son. He had gone dead-white, and tremors agitated the muscles of his seamed cheeks. He stood before Curly and seemed to increase in stature with his wrath, till the youth felt dwarfed.

"So yuh were one of Jake's gang," cried the banker. "A common, ordinary desperado and murderer. My son. Well, yuh've sown your seeds an' now yuh'll reap your harvest. An' may the Lord have mercy on your soul, for yuh'll get not a particle from us!" He turned to Stokes. "Sheriff, do your duty. Arrest this man for murder!"

CHAPTER III

The Man Who Escaped

IT WAS a grim troop trotting back to Halfmoon Junction along the sun-drenched trail. Crows cawed noisily in

the bare branches of the slender birches and cottonwoods. To the east the far-off hills shimmered in the noonday glare. The world was bright and cheerful, with a breeze just nipping enough to whip up the blood and make man feel it was good to be alive. But there was no joy in those riders. The words they were muttering were of death, not life.

No one knew how it started. Perhaps it was Jess Glassick, aching to be revenged for his brother; it might have been one of the others. However it was, talk of lynching started and now it was mounting to a dangerous pitch. The sheriff, who was silently riding a little ahead by the side of the banker, found himself becoming acutely worried. They were still a mile from town, where he could safely lodge Rance in the strong County Jail. First there had been some grumbling and a few guarded threats. Now the party was openly voicing its opinion that Rance ought to be seized and strung up.

Just this side of town was a massive old cottonwood known far and wide as "The Necktie Tree," because of the fact that from its projecting lowest limb more than one cattle rustler, horsethief, and badman had swung off into eternity. Little wonder the sheriff felt nervous. Once he got Rance safely by that ill-fated spot—

From the corner of his eye he regarded the Colonel. Surely he must be aware of what was going on behind them, must have heard come of the wild, inflammatory utterances. But Benton's face remained impassive, his mouth set and adamant. For a moment the sheriff considered warning the men to desist from such thoughts, but he was afraid that by the very act of admitting he took them seriously he might incite them to the violence he wished to avoid.

He stole a furtive glance at Curly. The youth was on Jake's handsome bald-faced stallion, the dead chief himself slung like a sack of meal across the pommel of one of the men. Curly's arms were tied behind him. His eyes, like those of his father, looked straight ahead, as if oblivious of the rest of the world. Instinctively Stokes spurred on his horse, as if to hurry the party by the dangerous place.

Now as they were coming abreast of the Necktie Tree, four horsemen detached themselves from the main body, trotted forward and headed off the sheriff and Benton. One of them, Jess Glassick, swung up knee-to-knee with the sheriff, who was forced to rein in.

"Jes' a minute, sheriff," Glassick said. "We're stoppin' off here for a li'l while—got a piece o' business to negotiate." His three companions had their rifles trained on Stokes and the Colonel, not too obviously but in a careless fashion that was, however, belied by the tense look on their faces. When Jess leaned over and pulled the sheriff's rifle from his fingers, he was so dumfounded it was seconds before he recovered to burst out:

"Hand back that gun, Jess. I warn yuh, don't yuh boys go an' do anythin' foolish. Don't do nothin' you'll be sorry fer. Gimme back that gun, I tell yuh."

Jess disregarded him, and spoke to the banker. "Colonel Benton, we're plumb sorry to have to do thisaway to yuh. We don't aim to hurt nobody 'cept them that has it comin' to 'em. So ef yuh'll jes' let us mind that-'ere rifle of yourn—that's right—"

THE old warrior had relinquished it without a move or protest, without stirring a muscle. The band had stopped under the fatal tree, and one of the men was taking a coil of rope from his saddle.

"For heaven's sake, boys," wailed the sheriff, "don't yuh do this thing. It's criminal." He appealed to Benton. "Yuh gotta stop 'em, Colonel. Yuh kin talk it outta them. The'll listen to yuh where they won't to me."

The banker's lips hardly moved; his demeanor had the severity of an Old Testament prophet: "He sowed the seeds. I won't raise a hand," he said.

"But, Colonel, he's your own son. At least he deserves a fair trial. It's not justice!"

But Stokes was shouted down with cries of: "We'll save the County th' expense of a trial!" and "Hank Glassick got no

trial!" and "That's what he's gittin'—justice!"

Sheriff Stokes' temporary deputies were taking the law into their own hands—ostensibly to uphold it, as is ever the way with mobs. Shaken and helpless, his face drawn with anxiety, he watched as Curly's horse was led under the cottonwood. The man with the rope quickly fastened the noose around Curly's throat, while another climbed the tree and made the rope fast to a thick limb that projected about twenty feet from the ground. Still another came over and roughly pulled the youth's feet from the stirrups.

Glassick circled his mount close to Curly. "Got anythin' to say before yuh step off?"

The youth's eyes flashed defiance and contempt. "Get it over with," he said.

Glassick hesitated, glanced toward the Colonel, sitting his horse austere and stone-faced as a statue. "Wanta say goodbye to yer father?" he offered.

The youth's pale eyes swept over him. "Don't waste any kindness on me," he said sardonically. "Finish your job."

Glassick held a quirt in his hand in readiness. One slash with it at the baldface's flank and it would be over. A rider suddenly emerged from a nearby grove of trees and was trotting to them, shouting to Glassick to hold on. Curiously the posse turned to the face of the newcomer. Curly's heart jumped as he recognized the wry-faced Lowry.

"Necktie party?" Lowry inquired innocently, looking about him with a smile.

"Who are *yuh?*" growled Glassick.

"Reckon I'm the feller oughta be playin' the villain in your mellerdrama. What yuh want to annoy that nice kid fer?"

"This nice kid," spat out Glassick, "was one o' the gang that tried to hold up the bank awhile ago. Now git outta my way."

He raised the quirt again, but the newcomer leaned over and seized his wrist. Lowry was still smiling, but his eyes were not. "I jes' said, mister, that yuh got the wrong feller. *I'm* the man yuh want." He turned to Curly. "Have yuh been joshin' these geezers into believin' yuh're one of Jake's Boys?"

Curly met his eyes, then grunted: "I told 'em nothin'."

"Thought so," Lowry nodded. He glimpsed the star peeping from under Stokes' coat and turned to address him. "Yuh're the sheriff, ain't yuh?"

Stokes, hemmed in by several armed riders so that he could hardly stir, ruefully admitted he was.

"Wal, I'm Bart Lowry o' the Pinkerton Agency—might've heard of me."

"Lowry?" the sheriff's features lighted. "I shore have. One of the best range dicks in the business, I've heard."

"Thank yuh," Lowry said modestly. "Also, sheriff, it 'pears I'm about the last man o' Jake's gang left alive—the one yuh failed to ketch."

THE horsemen surged closer around the speaker, gaping and excited. But Jess Glassick glared at him with obvious disbelief.

"What're yuh tryin' to hand us?" he blustered.

"Them's facts. I kin understand how come yuh mistook the kid fer me, seein' we was masked. I'll tell yuh how it was—" he broke in with a wry expression— "But first, would yuh mind removin' that rope?" he motioned toward Curly with his head. "Makes my innards kinda onsteady to think what would happen if that cayuse was to shy."

Sullenly Glassick slid the knot of the noose and lifted it over the youth's head, not without warning Lowry: "Make yer talk good, stranger. Or mebbe we'll be celebratin' a double hangin' instead."

"Nothin' wrong with your sense of humor, grinned Lowry, but became immediately serious. "It was thisaway; I'd been honin' for a long time to ketch up with Jake's gang. But they was a slippery outfit, as yuh know. They'd pull a job an' lose themselves in some hideaway. So I had no more luck'n a hundred other detectives an' Government agents that was houndin' Jake's trail. Then one day headquarters asked me to trace some fool kid that up an' strayed from home. An' huntin' down my young maverick, blame

my cats ef I didn't run plumb into Jake's gang by accident.

"Wal, from then on I stick prett' close to Jake's roost. I got to talk to 'im an' after a while I'll be switched ef he didn't somehow git the notion I was one o' his own kind—a bad man on the prod. Dunno what gave him that idear, onless mebbe some cock-eyed fairy stories I thunk up an' pertended they happened to me.

"Finally, he gits plumb friendly an' invites me to join the Boys, which was just what I was playin' fer. We was sorta isolated an' there was no way I could git in touch with the law. So o' course the thing to do was to stick with 'em, which I done. That's how come I was on the Fernald job yestiddy. I'm the feller that left the note in the telegraph office to let yuh know we was comin'. I was supposed to wreck the instruments, but I took pains not to hurt the transmitter none though I chopped up things prett' general."

"So it was yuh left the note," the sheriff exclaimed.

Lowry nodded and went on: "An' this mornin' when I rode into Halfmoon with th' gang—"

Colonel Benton thrust himself forward. He had been listening eagerly; he did not know whether to believe or disbelieve. "Yuh mean yuh rode in with the bandits knowin' we'd probably be waitin' to blow yuh clear to the devil?"

"Wal," Lowry scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully, "there warn't no other way o' trappin' 'em, far's I could see. Had to take the chance." He smiled "An' a point in my favor, I *knew* there was the blow-off comin'. So when the shootin' began I was ready to duck quick. In all the excitement I sorta dropped outta sight an' here I am."

But Jess Glassick was still unconvinced. "Yeah, but that don't explain how he—" Jess jerked his head toward Rance —"comes to have Fernald Bank money on him."

"I begin to see the light," smiled Lowry. "Yes, sir, I think I do. I gave this lad four thousand dollars in new bills that Jake Slemp handed me as my share of the Fernald job. Seein' I wasn't shore how I'd come out in the raid this mornin', I gave it to the lad fer safe-keepin'. Is that the money yuh're referrin' to?"

"Yuh mean to say yuh gave four thousand dollars to a feller yuh didn't even know?" cried Glassick.

"Who said I didn't know this yere lad?" said Lowry. "'Course I did. Why, I'd been chasin' him down fer three months. He's the one I was tellin' yuh about—him that strayed from home.

"When I found him up around Sundance, I made 'im promise to go home. But before I could even send in a report to the office, I falls in with Jake's Boys, so I never heard if he did till last evenin'. We was camped 'bout forty miles north o' here an' I was takin' a pasear by myself when I run across 'im ridin' by. I talked to 'im for a minute and slipped 'im the money to keep for me."

LOWRY talked so fluently and with such naturalness that his listeners could hardly fail to be convinced. It was such a glib mixture of truth and fancy that even Curly himself was almost ready to believe all of it. But Glassick wasn't through:

"Did yuh hire a Pinkerton to find Rance?" he wheeled on Colonel Benton.

Lowry's eyes narrowed. He seemed tense as he watched the faces of the posse turn toward the banker. The white-haired man, pale, cleared his throat. He looked at Lowry.

"I did," he said. "It's clear this man is telling the truth." He turned angrily on Jess Glassick. "Yuh fool," he cried, "can't yuh see? My boy's innocent—innocent."

Lowry somehow looked immensely relieved. He added confidently, grinning: "If there's still any doubt about me bein' me, why, there's the telegraph office. A wire will git my credentials here in no time."

"There's none," said the Colonel dumbly. He pushed his hat off his forehead in an absent manner, looked about himself helplessly, and tears sprang into his eyes. The iron will that had submerged every trace of emotion during the near-lynch-

ing gave way and he seemed about to break down. Silently he wrung Lowry's hand, thanked him in an unsteady voice. Then with a glance toward his son that seemed to ask forgiveness but was ashamed to ask it, he swung his horse about and with bent head trotted slowly toward the town.

The turn of events had produced a remarkable change also in fat Sheriff Stokes. Now feeling entirely vindicated, he resumed his official air with a rush. Frowning, he tore his rifle from the grasp of the man who had it, squared his shoulders, stuck a cigar in his mouth, and took active command of his deputies again.

"Every blamed one o' yuh owes a vote of thanks to Mr. Lowry," he scolded them.

"Ef 'twarn't fer him it would be my painful duty to run the whole damn' kaboodle o' yuh in fer murder." He regarded the posse indignantly and they, now thoroughly cowed, looked meek enough. Even Glassick had slunk back into their midst to efface himself. But the sheriff picked him out: "Yuh there, Jess. Hump yerself an' loose them ropes offen Rance. It's the least yuh kin do."

Glassick obeyed without a murmur and the sheriff continued: "An' I ain't heard nobody givin' Rance credit fer killin' Jake. Why, we might never've ketched him 'cept fer Rance. I aim to see he gits the reward."

Once again Lowry seemed more than mildly startled. "Yuh killed Jake, Curly?" he asked.

"We fought for his gun an' he got shot," Curly said quietly. "But there's no reward comin' to me. If any's due it belongs to Hank Glassick's widow."

AT THIS, with that mercurial change of heart so common to mobs, the men who but a few minutes before could not get the youth strung up soon enough to suit them now cheered him at the top of their voices.

"Well, now, that's better," beamed the sheriff. And then, staring at the old cottonwood with the yellow noose swinging in the breeze, a thought occurred to him. "But before I fergit it, yuh, Jones an' Barnaby—" he addressed two of the men —"I want yuh to fetch back a couple axes an' chop down this Necktie Tree. It offers a sight too much temptation to some folks."

And with that the party started back to town, the sheriff riding at their head. For the most part the men were silent, lost in their own thoughts. But Lowry and the youth, trailing slightly behind and riding knee to knee, were carrying on a quiet conversation.

"Why did yuh do it?" Curly was asking, contrite and humbled.

"Heck, you ain't no killer but a damn' fool kid that got mixed up in bad company, tha's all. Yuh might not believe it, but when I was your age I was prett' wild myself." He smiled wryly at the youth— "an' I didn't turn out so bad after all. I figger mebbe yuh might do the same. Yuh won't let me down, will yuh, son?"

The youth's pale eyes shone as they turned to the gray-haired detective. "Yuh can trust me. I never will."

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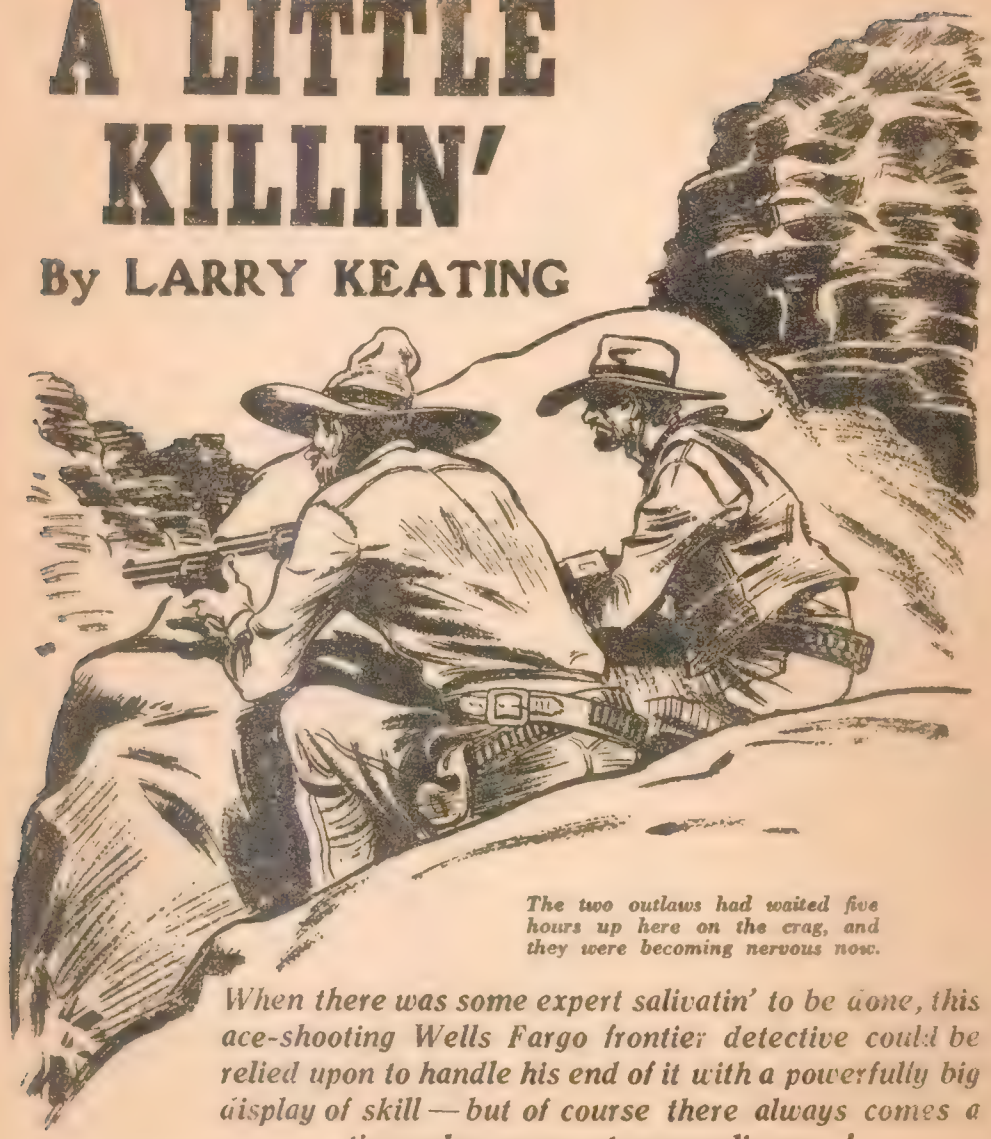
A LITTLE KILLIN'

By LARRY KEATING



The two outlaws had waited five hours up here on the crag, and they were becoming nervous now.

When there was some expert salivatin' to be done, this ace-shooting Wells Fargo frontier detective could be relied upon to handle his end of it with a powerfully big display of skill — but of course there always comes a time when even a top gun-slinger—!

THE whiskered man flat on his stomach behind the mica-gleaming rock squinted again through his rifle sights. For the dozenth time he shifted the gun slightly, making certain it commanded the sharp elbow of the canyon shelf trail. Turning his head, he squirted lager tobacco juice at a weed, and saw his horse and Lace Fleck's waiting ten yards back between two high rocks. He could see the saddlebag on each horse that held nearly twenty thousand dollars worth of gold dust.

Red Keston faced front. There was a bitter, icy gleam in his eyes that always shimmered there when he was waiting to do a murder.

His crooked-jawed companion stirred two feet away. He also was flat on his stomach, also was watching the trail over his rifle resting in a niche of their rock breastwork. Keston's wide lips moved in a confident sneer.

"We'll pump lead through that lousy express dick! The two of us can't miss. S'posed to be so foxy nobody ever got

him 'tween gun sights. But this time's different, eh, Lace? He'll come ridin' along that there trail. He won't close this case —but *we* will!"

Lace Fleck nodded as he drew a pint whiskey flask from his pocket and laid it beside him. "We'll blast Callahan to Kingdom Come. We got to, or he'll foller us clear into Mexico." He stared at the trail below. " 'Tain't fifty yards when he gits to that elbow, and I've hit the top of a tin can farther away than that—done it a thousand times.

"But I wish he'd come," Fleck snarled. "Reckon Brad Callahan wasn't so close behind as we thought, Red."

"After two days o' breakin' down hossflesh, did you think he had us within a quarter-mile?" Keston retorted.

They lay a moment in silence. The sky above was a pale blue field behind a noonday sun that beat down fiercely.

"The devil himself wouldn't suspect us here," Keston gloated. "Wait till he's in that elbow below. I'll count three so we both shoot at once. We *got* to cut him down," he agreed, snarling.

"Don't forget, Lace, it's worth forty thousand to us to smear this lobo!"

They waited five hours in this elevated, craggy spot of the canyon. The tedium of it in the boiling sunshine, the utter silence, and the pressure of waiting for Brad Callahan, ace of Wells Fargo detectives, was making both outlaws nervous.

THE wide, colorful-walled canyon twisted and writhed out of sight to the north. Its flat bottom, three hundred feet below, showed a glinting creek with grass and trees along its banks. Against the west wall of the canyon, forty feet from its top prairie edge, ran a shelf along which the narrow trail curled. The two men were in a turn just above this shelf, commanding the trail-elbow perfectly.

Keston and Fleck breathed deep. For down the canyon where the trail revealed briefly, they spied a horseman. A dot of yellow and black, he came at a slow trot, with tiny dust puffs floating up in his wake. The sun flickered on the blue carbine across his saddle in front of him. Then the rider was gone.

"See that yella shirt?" Lace notified excitedly. "When we ran out the back o' that express office in Eagle Creek, I saw Callahan runnin' and shootin'. He had on a bright yella shirt. This sure is him, Red!"

"Yeah. It'll be a minute yet before he hits this last curve."

They waited. Keston, as his comrade had done a moment ago, drew a pint bottle of whiskey from his pocket. He uncorked it, smelled it. Fleck's hand gripped his forearm.

"No drinkin' now, Red. Remember, killin' this hombre means forty thousand for us, just like you said. And either we git him or the buzzard'll get us for sure. He's got that kind of rep!

"You ain't shaky, are you, Red?" he added anxiously.

Keston replaced the cork. "Naw, I ain't shaky. Don't do no drinkin' when there's a job on like this. I was just smellin' it, Lace. I'll pour that whole bottle down my gullet when we've finished Callahan!"

He felt a little shaky, though. Gun butcher that he was, Red Keston always got to quivering as the showdown moment neared.

"Don't think of his record. Spoil your shootin'," Fleck sought to encourage him.

"Shut your big mouth! I'll do my part an' you do yours! If you can't lay quiet, take a drink yourself!"

"I will, afterward. Watch your rifle now, Red. And I'll wait till you count three. We'll— There he comes!" Fleck whispered.

Their granite-hard eyes gleamed down the sights of their rifles. The dappled grey horse came ambling from the last twist of the canyon shelf trail, holding its head down oddly. Both men noted the vivid yellow shirt of the rider, saw that his sombrero and trousers were black. They couldn't see his face, a blank of hat shadow as the express company detective came on.

It was harder . . . harder for Keston and Fleck to keep from squeezing their

triggers. Two murders during that express station holdup had set a price on their heads. It meant that if Brad Callahan took them back to Eagle Creek for trial, there would be a double hanging to follow it some orange-shot daybreak.

Their lives and the forty thousand dollars of loot hung on accurate shooting now. Forty thousand dollars — eighty thousand *pesos* in Mexico, a mere sixty miles south! The killing of Brad Callahan meant that the only law-vengeance they need really fear was obliterated. It meant a life of laziness, gambling and drink. Easy street!

Each man cocked the hammer of his rifle. Each noted the way the dappled horse carried its nose down to its chest. The wait seemed an eternity . . . as the horse came on.

"One," Red Keston whispered.

Their eyes narrowed to mere slits. Their forefingers crooked around their triggers.

"Two!"

The horseman reached the sharp elbow of the trail.

"Three!"

Their guns roared together. The reverberations whacked from one canyon wall to the other, lessening as they dribbled into distance.

The rider swayed backward drunkenly. His carbine plopped into trail dust as the horse reared up. The beast struck hard on all four and bolted with a jerk that lurched its rider out of leather.

He pitched splashing into grey dust—lay face-down, motionless.

"Got him!" Fleck shouted. "Square 'tween the eyes!"

They looked at each other. Triumph wreathed their sweaty faces. Then the terrible reaction of murder brought an abrupt loss of nerve control. Each flung down his empty rifle and snatched up his flask of whiskey.

That fiery and very welcome alcohol was pouring down their gullets when a grimly calm voice behind them said:

"Claw clouds! Quick, you dry-gulchers!"

THE unexpectedness of it froze them. Then Fleck and Keston leaped to their feet, spilling their whiskey bottles. The rye drooled over their chins. One bottle smashed on a rock. The killers spun around as if on pivots, their hands slashing to forty-fives in low-cut holsters. They saw a tall, youngish man hatless, barefoot, and in his underwear.

"Don't!" Brad Callahan yelled.

But already they were drawing with speed that was magical. And Callahan, forced to shoot, drove lead into Lace Fleck's wrist to shatter bones and bulge skin as its flattened nose came to a stop.

Keston's bullet burned Callahan's bare shoulder. His gun bucked twice in answer. A black spot appeared in Red's throat and became larger as he pitched on his face without a sound.

With a wild scream Fleck threw both arms in the air, his right hand dangling and smeared with blood.

Callahan kept him covered while he backed to pick up the double lariat with which he had lowered himself from the top of the canyon wall. Then he went to Fleck and in a moment had him securely bound.

"Hope you didn't plug my hoss," he said softly. "Hope my clothes ain't too much bullet-cut." Finishing, he stepped away for a look at the dead Keston, then at the outlaws' horses nearby with their saddlebags bulging with loot.

"How—how'd you—" Fleck stammered helplessly.

"Eh? Oh, just made up a dummy. Strapped a little sack o' oats on my hoss's chest, which keeps him goin' forward slow. But it took me quite a bother to hoist up to range level, run along it a piece, then slip down in the canyon again. 'Specially barefoot," he explained, looking ruefully at his scratched and bleeding feet. "You see, not knowing which hairpin turn you hombres would try to ambush me on, I pulled this same stunt three other places in the last eight miles."

Then he added sardonically: "Sorry to make you wait so long for a little killin'."

Give Him a Gun—!

(Continued from page 25)

yanked his tousled hair the same instant.

Stubby broke at the middle and sprawled face down on the floor, still trying as he died there to get his gun up for a shot at Clay. An instant later Al Brant pitched forward across Stubby's body, shot through the heart by Clay's second bullet.

Clay swayed on his long legs, peering down at them through the fog of gunsmoke, marveling that they were down and he was still untouched.

"Clay, are you all right?"

It was Sally at his side, clinging to him, her white face tipped up to his and her eyes wide with horror and fear—for him.

"Sure," he said, lifting his eyes to the door. "Somebody's coming."

The handle shook violently and the door trembled under the savage impact of beating knuckles.

"Open up in there!" bellowed Luke Fageol's raspy voice.

Clay half turned to the open door behind him. Sally clung to his hand.

"No, Clay, not that way. It's no use to run. We'll face it here—together."

She walked to the front door, unlocked it and pulled it open. Luke Fageol and several armed men crowded into the little office. Luke Fageol stared down at the bodies of Stubby and Al Brant, and lifted inquiring eyes to Clay.

"Al Brant was the boss of the gang who robbed the mail train at Salt Fork two years ago," explained Clay. "Stubby called him that and they tried to down me. The money is over against the wall."

"Yeah, we know about it," said the marshal. "Drolling and his half of the posse ran into Kench and Selpp down near the livery barn a little while ago and made gun talk. Before he cashed in all his chips Kench told the truth about Al Brant, the mail robbery, and a lot of other crimes we've been trying to clear up hereabouts. Selpp was the man who shot Barrett over your shoulder and ran.

"I got my first tip that something was afoot when Kench and Stubby, the two star witnesses against you, couldn't be found next morning. So I started out detecting a bit. I found plenty of men who said that some man had run out of the Nugget ahead of you. Drolling and I talked it over and got our men together ready for action.

"By the way, Kench said Stubby wanted to kill you when you came out of the livery barn because you were riding a Broken M horse and he thought he'd head off Barrett that way. But the others weren't sure what Al Brant would want, and thought they'd better wait. Maybe Brant would want to use you for bait.

"We'll have Dugan Miller out of the pen in no time, and that will sure make everybody feel good. The reward for the return of this money runs ten per cent. That will give you ten thousand dollars. Not at all bad for a couple of young folks about to set up housekeeping, hey?"

Clay felt himself growing red. Sally's face was rosy with a deep blush, but she was smiling, and the side glance she stole up at Clay didn't leave any doubt in anybody's mind that Luke Fageol had the right slant on the situation.

Save your waste paper—and Sell It!

Plumb-Loco Cure

(Continued from page 33)

An' Doc Cole sent me high tailin' to bring yuh out. Jest as I told yuh."

"Sent yuh away so's he could have his chance to try his snake cure on my brother is what Doc Cole done!" cried out Hank Burton. "He took that deadly snake out'n the box hisself. Me an' Buller seen him bringin' it to the bed, an' we was too late to stop the snake bitin' poor John."

Doc Cole opened his dead black eyes as he saw a big, red-faced man wearing a sheriff's star. He had met Sheriff Danvers before. In fact, he had sold Sheriff Danvers snake oil once, and had been ordered out of town the next day when the sheriff took down sick.

Doc Cole did not move as Sheriff Danvers went quickly to the four-poster bed. Then—

"Looks like John's dead, right enough, Hank," said the sheriff. "But where's the snake? Look out! There he is, right by the foot of the bed! Snorky, you said he wasn't pizen, the one they took out'n the Doc Cole box. You get him."

"Just a moment, Sheriff Danvers," spoke Doc Cole quietly. "John Burton is not dead, unless he died from other causes than snake bite. The snake did not have a chance to strike him. You see, sheriff, the snake was put on the bed by Hank Burton and a man called Buller—"

"Why, yuh danged, lyin' killer—" And Hank Burton's boot toe cracked one of Doc Cole's ribs.

The sheriff's hard hand closed on Hank Burton's shoulder.

"A minute, Hank! Doc Cole says John isn't dead. I'll see—"

But it was the quicker Snorky who spoke up, holding a small mirror in his hand.

"Nope, sheriff," said Snorky. "John Burton's alive. See his breath makin' smoke on the lookin' glass. An' even if the snake bit him, it ain't pizen—"

"The snake did not bite John Burton," said Doc Cole solemnly. "You see I bit the snake first."

"You bit the snake?" Sheriff Danvers howled madly. "Say that again, Doc Cole. Yuh gone loco? I thought you said that you bit the snake?"

"That's what I said," repeated Doc Cole. "Hank Burton and Buller put that snake on John Burton's bed with a forked pole. It had been frozen in a cold spring. When it thawed out, I bit its tail. It bit back at me. So I bit right back and broke the snake's neck—"

It was Buller, redheaded and hard-eyed, who broke.

"You said, Hank, if anything happened—" Buller was going for his gun.

No one would have suspected that little Snorky could be so fast. The hundred pounds of dried rawhide landed upon Buller's back. Thin arms wrapped around Buller's throat, snapped back, and the big man's neck cracked.

By this time Sheriff Danvers had clamped a stranglehold upon Hank Burton. A slow, weak voice spoke from the four-poster bed.

"Doc Cole is right, sheriff," said John Burton. "I've been out a long time. But I was just rightful awake enough to hear Hank an' Buller talkin' about put-

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tin' a frozen snake on my bed. They went away, an' then I seen Doc Cole rear up an' grab that snake in his teeth. I guess my brother Hank has wanted all of the Bar-B-Bar a long time."

Snorky was cutting the rope off Doc Cole. Doc Cole sat up. Snorky grinned at him a little.

"You say, Doc Cole, yuh bit at a pizen snake to save John Burton?" said Sheriff Danvers, stirring the dead rattler with his boot toe. "That right smart guts, doc."

"Our snakes are not pizen, sheriff, even if I do advertise them as such," smiled Doc Cole. "I knew I was in no danger."

Snorky was suddenly on the floor beside the snake.

"Criminetty! Doc! This ain't one o' our reptiles! This'n is one Hank Burton must o' had caught! Look, sheriff! It's pizen is drippin' from its fangs!"

As Sheriff Danvers swore and bent forward, keeping his gun poked into Hank Burton's stomach, there was a solid thump on the floor.

Doc Cole, who claimed to be the great-grandson of Chief Black Eagle, the purveyor of Doc Cole's Snake Oil, had passed out cold.

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Tinhorn's Sweetie

(Continued from page 89)

lot in life seemed a triple dose of unadulterated hell.

The doctor had Whirl's chest bared.

"He's not dead!"

The doctor's words hammered her confused senses. She stared at the object the doctor held up. It was a gold locket, bent and with a bullet's mark plain on it.

"Bullet hit this locket," the doctor explained, fumbling in his bag. "Saved his life. But the shock knocked him cold, of course."

He broke a small vial and held the strong odors so Whirl must breathe them. Whirl jerked, sat up with a "Whew! Who let that in?"

He blinked foolishly as Maia knelt, her arms around his neck, crying, "You're not dead! The locket saved you, Whirl"

Realization rocketed back into Whirl Arrow's mind.

"Maia, you go on out. I ain't dead. No, *I* aint."

He looked over at Cass Broone as he rose shakily, clinging to a chair back for support. Broone leaned back against his bar, his fattish face mirroring dark hate, fear, perplexity.

"It'll be all right, dear," Whirl whispered. "Go away."

She knew it wouldn't be all right, yet she knew the ways of men. Maia went out of there, and men moved from between Cass Broone and Whirl Arrow.

"Well," said Arrow, conversationally. His confidence shook Broone to the core. "You got that Essie to steam the kid to gunning me. You knew I'd not shoot him, anyhow. But do you know that you're—?"

MEN marveled at the cuss-words at Whirl's command; but condemned him for a fool for bucking into Cass Broone now. Broone had seen a plan blown up, a girl get away from him. Broone's all was here in Roamer, and he could not take this cussing and remain. Too, Whirl Arrow was a shaky man, just the same as risen from the dead.

"You're asking for this Arrow," Cass Broone moaned, his dark face gone ashen.

"An' you got it," Whirl Arrow said, the sound of his gun still roaring in the saloon, the smoke still swirling from his pistol barrel.

Cass Broone was twisted back against the bar, his unfired six-gun in the litter at his feet. His head wabbled from side-to-side, his joints turned to rubber

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and he never made a sound as he folded to the floor.

"Gents," demanded Whirl, "is anybody wishful of argufyin' this?"

Nobody was.

Whirl smiled tightly. Kip, he knew, would be all right from now on out. No worry there. Despite the unpleasant feeling killing caused within him, Whirl Arrow was happier than ever he'd been before.

Usefulness, fulsomeness, a great love lay before him.

"Then, gents," he said back of a long, soft sigh, "I guess this death is on the house. An' the drinks go along with it."

Men moved barward, avoiding the spot where Cass Broone lay.

Whirl Arrow moved out into the night, into the soft arms, the sweet caress of Maia King.

Prodigal Sonuvagun

(Continued from page 99)

I have got around to a judgment as to the passin' out of Bunt Catter," said old Jim. But first, we will now examine the sudden demise of one Burt Wayne, whose sad passin' ain't a cause for grief or mournin'."

Wayne was startled. Hoppy Hogan stiffened, swallowed hard. Wayne would have spoken, in his surprise, but Nata's hand gripped his fingers tightly.

"Don't say anything," she whispered. "Just listen."

"I have to hand a note an' a bit o' evidence off the body of Burt Wayne which, as the law book says, runs concurrently in the two demises."

Old Jim slowly unwrapped a rolled bandanna. A bright, gold wheel of a spur clinked beside Carlotta's tainted money. A pin could have been heard to drop in the crowded room.

"I'll read the note," said old Jim. "It apparently was penned by one Burt Wayne 'fore he sashayed out'n prison an' come hellin' back to Big Basin. The note says:

To Whom It May Concern:

This gold spur wheel was picked up by me, Burt Wayne, on the scene of the gun-ruckus between the Y-T and the Double X spreads. In prison I had a friend learn that Bunt Carter bought a new gold spur wheel from a store back in St. Louis two weeks after that same gun ruckus. I want to say that Hoppy Hogan and me got to the line fence fight after the shooting was all over. Which is the truth, so help me God.

OLD JIM looked up, surveying the courtroom calmly. His blue eyes went to Nata, but seemed to pass over Wayne and Hoppy.

"Let it be understood that the verdict of the justice and the coroner must stand. I may add, that more than being the said coroner an' justice, I've my rights to a say-so. An' I'm believin' that note penned by Burt Wayne, 'fore, as we all know, he had his head dang nigh shot off by Jackson, the stage guard.

"So I'm adjudgin' an' pronouncin' that Burt Wayne came to his death by criminal violence on his own part. As for Bunt Carter, ponderin' the weight o' evidence, it is the decision of the coroner an' the judge that Bunt Carter came to his demise by accident, bein' so plumb misguided as to be lookin' into his gun at the time it was bein' triggered."

There was a long half minute of silence. Wayne gulped, wanted to speak. Again Nata's warm hand pressed his fingers.

Old Jim went on, calmly, "An' from the descriptions o' the hosses an' duds bein' worn by Burt Wayne an' one Hoppy Ho-

gan, it is the belief o' this coroner's court that one Hoppy Hogan departed this country after participatin' in the stage holdup. My own daughter says she saw him ride away after a bogus gunfight with Bunt Carter, on his paint hoss that was described in the prison posters."

A long-drawn breath came from the throats of the crowd.

"Sheriff Callahan!" ordered old Jim, his eyes now seeming to meet all other eyes in the room, "I find it unnecessary to hold on any longer to them two witnesses yuh took in at the scene o' Bunt Carter s unregretted passin'. I order you to free Wayne Burton and Hogan Hopper, two newcomers to these parts."

Wayne could almost feel the thoughts of the grim-faced residents of Big Basin. He saw friendly eyes boring into him and Hoppy. Hoppy looked as if he might choke to death at any minute.

Old Jim uttered but one more short sentence.

"An' 'sides bein' jedge an' coroner, who's any better right than me to welcome these new pilgrims to Big Basin?"

Old Jim slowly lifted his crutch and laid it across his desk. He rubbed the sweat from his chin with the elbow stump of his right arm.

The crowd roared. Voices made sudden, hoorahing thunder. Hard hands hammered upon Wayne's shoulders, and upon Hoppy's.

Nata's blue eyes were swimming. She whispered.

"Dad bein' the justice, an' all, Wayne Burton, would you think me presumin' to suggest that now's as good a time as any for me to become Mrs. Wayne Burton?"

Wayne thought it was.

Black Jack's Last Job

By JAMES BENNETT

THIS, Black Jack promised himself, was to be his last dishonest job. This one last train holdup, and then, with a stake for a fresh start in life, a quiet departure for South America and an honest living.

There wouldn't even have been the necessity for another holdup if it hadn't been for the terrible run of bad luck at that Folsom gaming table that afternoon when he'd left a thousand dollars on the green. However!

His gang, with whom the huge, black-eyed two-hundred pounder had terrorized the Rocky Mountain region during the latter years of the eighteen-nineties, had been dispersed, some of the members killed or badly wounded in the disastrous battle with the law following an ill-starred train holdup the month before. So on this evening of August 16, 1899, Back Jack Ketchum—Tom Ketchum, he'd been born —prepared for his final act of outlawry single-handed.

When the Denver and Fort Worth express stopped to take on water at the outskirts of the small New Mexico town of Folsom, Black Jack slipped like a ghost from the woods and climbed up between the engine and the baggage car. After the train got under way again, Black Jack crouched where he was for several minutes. Then he silently made his way over the coal tender, dropped into the locomotive cab, and thrust a gun muzzle into the engineer's ribs, ordering him to stop the train as soon as he gave the word.

On a horseshoe curve six miles from Folsom, Black Jack ordered a halt, and the train jolted to a stop. Following the outlaw's instructions, backed up by his ready rifle, the engineer and firemen dismounted and began to uncouple the engine and baggage car from the rest of the

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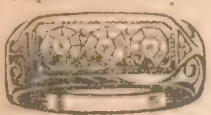

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train, their labors lighted by a lantern held by the express messenger, Charlie Drew.

As the men strained to accomplish the uncoupling, made difficult by the train's being on a grade, Fred Bartlett, the mail clerk, looked out of the mail coach to see what was happening up ahead. Black Jack shouted to him to pull back in if he didn't want his head shot off. When this order was not obeyed quickly enough, Black Jack, a crack shot, blazed away, and Bartlett collapsed backward with a bullet through his cheek.

While this had been going on, the train's conductor, a man named Harrington, had been hurrying forward through the train, the jerking stop of the train being indication to him that something was wrong. When he entered the mail coach, he stumbled over the form of Bartlett, who lay moaning and profusely bleeding on the floor.

Harrington shared the hot feeling of all railroad men of the day against the outlaws who had recently been indulging in a wave of holdups throughout the West. Another train on which he had been conductor had been held up a short while before, and he had sworn to kill the next train bandit he encountered.

Shotgun in hand, he opened the mail coach door a crack. There, outlined in the light of the express messenger's lamp, he could see the rifle-armed figure of Black Jack, standing back a few yards from the others. He lifted his shotgun, took quick aim, and fired.

Black Jack was gifted with phenomenally quick eyes, and the moment the shotgun was poked through the door, his rifle flashed up to send a bullet into the conductor's arm. But as Harrington fell back from the opening, he had the satisfaction of knowing, through a yell of profanity from the outlaw, that his buckshot had found its mark.

The messenger immediately turned off his lantern and Black Jack melted away into the darkness. Harrington, the conductor, satisfied with drawing blood, decided against taking further chances and

gave orders to get the train going again at once.

BLACK JACK had tethered his horse not far off, planning to mount and ride as soon as he had blown open the express safe with the dynamite that he had cached near the tracks. He now set off to reach the horse—but his right arm had been shattered by forty-two pellets of buckshot and despite the tourniquet that he had managed to apply with his teeth and left hand, a loss of blood so weakened him that before he got to the animal he sank down in a coma a few hundred yards from the tracks. At dawn he roused sufficiently to wave his black hat at a passing train. It halted and the engineer and a brakeman came over to him. He handed over his weapons and, feeling himself near death, talked freely. In a few moments, a northbound freight came along on the other side of the tracks. It stopped and the sheriff of Union County, Saturnino Pinard, dismounted, having taken the first train out of Clayton when he had heard of the holdup. As he approached, Black Jack asked who he was. On being told it was a lawman, the outlaw's old spirit flared momentarily. "If only I had a gun," he gasped, "I could shoot the ———'s heart out."

He was carried aboard the first train and taken to the hospital at Trinidad, Colorado. Here the forty-two slugs were removed from his arm, and he was then taken to the penitentiary at Santa Fe. His arm now became badly infected, and the prison doctor decided to amputate it. Black Jack refused to take an anesthetic —he said he wanted to know just what was going on when anybody started to cut him up. He was attended by a guard and a nurse, and underwent the amputation without a sound. It is said that when it was over he smiled up at the doctor and said, "Let me know if I can do the same for you some day, Doc."

Black Jack languished in jail for many months before he went on trial at Clayton, Union County, in September, 1900. He was convicted of "train robbery while armed" and sentenced to be hanged.

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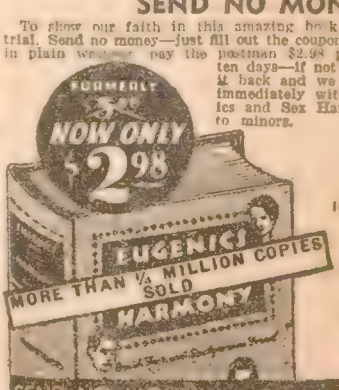

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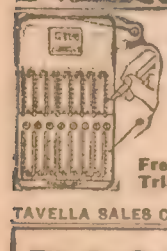

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The day set for his execution, April 26, 1901, came. He had said: "When my time comes, I think I'll keep my nerve."

AND he kept it. The morning of his execution at the Clayton courthouse, he remarked that he wished the hanging could be a half hour earlier than scheduled—for then, he said, he'd be able to have dinner in hell. When he was being outfitted for his execution garb, he asked the clerk to give him shoes a size too large, since his feet would swell after death and he didn't want pinched feet.

He played cards with a guard up to the last minute, and then was marched up to the scaffold. The town sheriff, Salome Garcia, had been designated executioner, and to prepare himself for the disagreeable task he had been drinking heavily all morning. Thus it was that, as Black Jack stood calmly on the scaffold, Garcia was so unsteady when the moment came to cut the rope to release the trapdoor that his first blow with a hatchet missed completely, the hatchet blade being buried deeply in the post. It took several minutes to extricate it. The prisoner cursed him for the delay, urging him to hurry up and get things over with.

Black Jack had previously expressed a dread of suffocation. When the hatchet was finally freed and the executioner struck again, this time cutting through the rope, Black Jack, evidently wishing to be sure his neck would be snapped, leapt upward the moment the trap was sprung. This act, and the outlaw's great weight—combined with the fact that the drop was eight and a half feet instead of the legally required seven—more than granted his wish that he be spared the agonies of strangulation. For when afterwards they cut down the body, it was found that his head had been completely severed from his body, it having been kept in place only by the strongly-pinned black cloth that had been placed over it.

One can imagine the ghost of Black Jack Ketchum arising with a grim joke. "Well," one can hear him growl, "I reckon I kept my nerve all right, but I guess I did lose my head a little, at that!"

Postman's Holiday

By GREGORY BRUFF

EIGHTEEN dollars to bring a letter from San Francisco to Sacramento may seem a fairly stiff fee, but those news-starved Argonauts were glad to pay it; and for this and like services, Alexander H. Todd and his partner were soon clearing a thousand dollars a day.

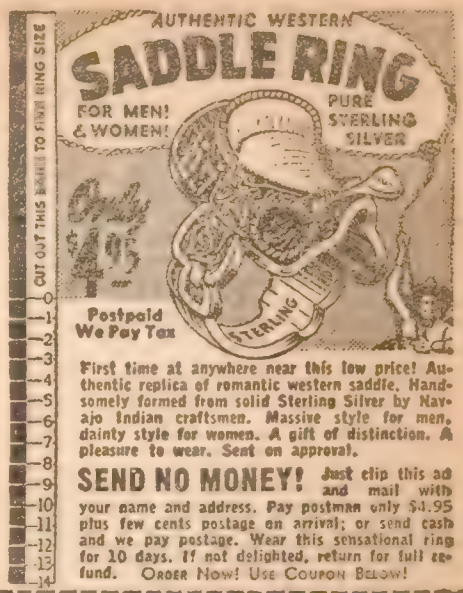
It was Todd who established the first express company of any importance in California. He arrived in San Francisco in June, 1849, eager for sudden wealth via pick and shovel, and went at once into the southern mine fields. Soon he found his health failing under the back-breaking toil, looked about for an easier method to make a living, and suddenly saw a way that proved profitable beyond his wildest dreams.

The first post office had been established in California on November 9, 1848. By July, 1851, there were only sixty post offices in all of California, and only twenty of these were in the mining district.

So it was that for a long period, all mail Joaquin river boat back to San Francisco was delivered by the government only as far as San Francisco, there to be picked up by the addressee or some traveling acquaintance.

Todd shrewdly saw what a bonanza such a situation could become, and about a month after his arrival he had set about organizing an express messenger service between San Francisco and the surrounding mining camps.

His first move was to journey through the towns of the southern diggings, taking down the names of all who wished to subscribe to his projected service. Charging a dollar to get on his list, he soon had a solid working capital. He then went to the postmaster at San Francisco, got sworn in as a postal clerk, and gathered up the large accumulation of letters addressed to his clients. The postmaster naturally was overjoyed to get the damned things cleaned out. Todd then bought up all the Eastern newspapers he could find



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in town and returned to the gold fields.

There he delivered the letters—and for each one received one ounce of gold dust, then worth between fifteen and twenty dollars! The newspapers he disposed of for the more modest price of eight dollars a copy.

Despite his piratical charges, Todd had within a few months a list of more than two thousand subscribers. The postmaster decided that he might as well make a little something from the golden game and began charging Todd twenty-five cents for each letter he picked up. This was quite all right with Todd, who simply passed along the fee as an added tariff to his clients—and, for good measure, began to add the forty cents already once paid by the sender as postage from the East.

After his first delivery, Todd stopped overnight at Stockton to catch a San Joaquin river boat back to San Francisco. Some of the merchants there asked him if he'd deliver a few parcels for them. He readily consented. These parcels turned out to be a number of boxes and packages filled with gold dust, the total worth $200,000, consigned to Lord and Company in San Francisco.

Being a newcomer to California, Todd was slightly staggered by this demonstration of confidence in a stranger, typical of the free-and-easy times. In any event, he repacked the dust in a butter keg and went aboard with it in the morning.

NO wharves had yet been built in San Francisco, and his boat dropped anchor on its arrival near the abandoned ship *Niantic*, which was stuck in the mud at Clay and Sansome Streets. A narrow, rickety, wooden ramp rose to the *Niantic's* deck from the water. A skiff from the boat bearing Todd and his keg put alongside this, and, no doubt praying earnestly, Todd, assisted by a couple of crew members under the less soul-straining impression that they were handling butter, rolled the treasure safely up the ramp.

Whatever anxiety Todd may have suffered over possible loss of his cargo overboard or through robbery seems to have

been pretty well compensated for: on handing the dust over to Lord and Company, he asked for and received a delivery fee of five per cent, or $10,000.

Steamers—or any kind of boats—were infrequent on the San Joaquin, so for his return trip to Stockton, Todd bought a large rowboat for three hundred dollars. He then announced that he would take back a few passengers. He was deluged with applications and from these selected a boatload of sixteen. He charged his passengers an ounce of gold dust apiece for their passage; made them bring their own food; and had them do all the rowing, while he lolled in the stern and steered.

Todd took on a partner and within a year the pair were averaging, month after month, a net profit of a thousand dollars a day. But competition from the dozens of other express companies that swiftly sprang up forced reduction of rates and soon the fantastic get-rich-quick days were over. However, Todd and Company was still a flourishing concern when, in 1853, the partners sold out this first great California express company.

Table Stakes

(Continued from page 71)

throw himself forward, to fasten upon Reagan's wrist just as the gun was coming out.

The hammer must have caught, for there was a quick explosion. Reagan's breath hissed into Slim's face. His eyes held a look of surprise, and almost as quickly they held no expression whatever.

A bullet from his own gun had punctured his heart.

Slim felt his knees giving away. But once more he fought to keep his strength. For Mary's cool white arms were around him.

Her lips were sweet upon Slim's dry, burning mouth. She was straining him close to her. In the midst of all that shambles, there was a promise that would have brought life to a dead man.

And he wasn't dead!

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